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INTIMATE FICTIONS: THE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF OBSCENE VIOLENCE IN
FOUR NOVELS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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ABSTRACT

Richard Wright, Marlon James, Cormac McCarthy and Ken Levine are each celebrated in their respective fields but notorious for their obscene depictions of violence. Contrary to trauma theorists' claims that violence shatters language and cannot be spoken, these writers speak violence in its most disturbing forms: torn eyeballs, dead infants, forced fecal consumption and mechanized rape. I argue that obscene violence, much like obscene language, creates a space of intimacy in which transgressive, subversive and oppositional thoughts may be spoken. By alienating their texts from the larger reading public, these writers entice a smaller group of sympathetic readers to develop affective attachments to their stories. In other words, repulsion and attraction, disgust and fascination, segregate the public into insiders and outsiders. Obscene violence carves out an intimate space of representation, a magic circle open to the public but separate from the public. Because obscene violence will not be spoken about in polite society, its employment in these texts imbues the writer's ideas with the power of the secret, the sacred and the criminal. Such violence works as a rhetorical device in service of larger critiques against American and Jamaican cultural, political and religious institutions. Literary violence does not necessarily entail a direct critique of violence. Because violence plays an oversized role in American and Jamaican history, particularly in the foundation of race and racial difference, images of violence can be attached to a multitude of ideas. Within this study, these ideas include the white fascination with race novels, the mythology of Jamaican Maroons, the dogma of the Catholic Church and the causal link between videogames and adolescent aggression.

INTRODUCTION: THE INTIMACY OF VIOLENCE

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843) opens with the narrator-protagonist, in a fit of drunken rage, cutting his cat's eye with a pen-knife. The fury which compelled him "thrilled every fibre of my being" (8). Retelling the event produces an almost orgasmic response: "I blush, I burn, I shudder" (8). His guilt devolves into "the spirit of PERVERSENESS," which he labels "one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties" (8). He asks who among us has not done the same thing a hundred times before, has not committed wrong solely for the pleasure of committing wrong. The narrator romanticizes the eyeball slashing even while regretting it, borrowing from the language and sensory responses of lust and eros. By asking us to admit we have acted the same way, by claiming that this compulsion is ancient and unshakeable, the narrator cultivates a sort of perverse intimacy between the reader and himself. The notion that literary violence produces intimacy may sound strange. Many readers who encounter such a passage would simply close the book. I sympathize with those readers. But that forced separation between the repulsed reader and the attracted reader, the outsider and the insider, reinforces the intimacy of the textual space. The narrator has shared a feeling and admitted an action which are both socially unacceptable. By doing so, he has designated the text as a private space, an intimate space, where the socially unacceptable is accepted. The text is not actually a private space, of course. The text is published for the public. But the text functions like Johan Huizinga's play-ground in *Homo Ludens* (1938), sometimes referred to as the magic circle, a space ostensibly open to the public but designated as separate, sacred, different, where the rules of society may not apply. When a narrator opens a story with a perverse act of violence, they are pointing out the line between acceptable social discourse and the unacceptable discourse of the text.

Violating an eyeball, the only fleshy part of our bodies unprotected by skin, holds some sort of special power as an aesthetic device. Anyone who has seen Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) knows the sort of instant revulsion that a sliced eyeball can produce. Yet viewers find that image impossible to forget. If a writer can attach an argument or philosophy to such an unforgettable image, that idea gains a remarkable amount of rhetorical power. A violent image may be used to repel a reader from a particular idea, or it may be used to attract them to it. This notion of a repulsive or attractive image resembles the theory of abjection in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982). But Kristeva's theory would overstate the image's effect by associating it with fear and jouissance, when more appropriate terms would be disgust and fascination. The abject image is dangerous but not threatening. We can sit down and study it. And the argument attached to the violent image does not need to be about violence itself. "The Black Cat" tells us relatively little about animal cruelty or spousal abuse, but it tells us a great deal about how alcoholics compartmentalize their guilt. The graphic disfigurement of a cat's eye simply adds substance and weight to Poe's loathing of alcoholism.

The rhetorical weight of violence in literature works like the spectacular weight of violence in society, as a means of impressing upon the witness the power and authority of the actor. Arthur Redding refers to the weight of violence "as the ballast of ideologies; as in the semi-secret cargo of a slave trader's ship" (4-5). The actual violence of the slave ship serves as a balancing force between the African power of the enslaved and the European power of the slaver. The violence impresses on the slave the social rules and relations they must abide by in the New World. The

violence “seasons” the enslaved and promotes the security of the plantation, a space under constant threat of collapse from slave insurrection. Middle Passage violence works like Kristeva’s theory of abjection, like the body’s nauseous expulsion of anything which might blur the line between life and death, between white power and black power. But Redding’s strategic reference to the horrors of the slave ship better exemplifies the literary violence this project examines. He deploys the rhetorical weight of Middle Passage violence to make a philosophical critique of ideology itself: “there is blood in the hold of every way of seeing” (5). In Redding’s anarchist philosophy, the slave trader symbolizes any dynamic system which exercises authority through coercion.

Celebrated authors in recent American and Jamaican literature have incorporated perverse acts of literary violence to intensify their philosophical critiques of American and Jamaican institutions. The four subjects of my dissertation—Richard Wright, Marlon James, Cormac McCarthy and Ken Levine—have each been praised as among the greatest writers of their respective cohorts, and their texts rely heavily on graphic violence to engage and persuade their readers. Two of them have borrowed the opening strategy of ocular trauma designed by Poe. The first chapter of McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) features a deformed cutthroat, Toadvine, prying out an eyeball with his thumb. The violence becomes a moment of queer intimacy between himself and a teenage boy. As Toadvine holds his victim by the hair, he tells the kid to join in: “Kick him in his mouth, called Toadvine. Kick it. [...] Kick him, he called. Aw, kick him, honey” (10). Addressing the boy as a romantic partner, commanding him to keep penetrating the victim’s mouth, Toadvine imbues this violence with the perverse quality of rape. None of these three men know each other, so the meaninglessness of their violent encounter sets up the novel’s later critique of meaning itself, particularly the meaning-making of Catholicism.

Because the eye is associated with perspective, an eye-gouging works particularly well as a symbolic attack on another’s worldview. In the opening scene of James’s *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), the narrator-protagonist describes pulling out a man’s eyeball with two fingers.¹ First, he condemns a fetish priest for delighting in prepubescent circumcisions and deflowerings. He accuses the priest of searching for “something that you have lost—no, it was taken from you. That light, you see it and you want it [...] you search for it in holes, black holes, wet holes, underground holes for the light that vampires look for” (4) Then he provides the socket image, attaching its ugliness to his critique of clerical perversion. These tactile moments of corporeal violence, where the assailants not only touch their victim’s face but reach inside its openings, shock the reader’s sensibilities and intensify the attached institutional criticisms. Kathryn Hume refers to such texts as “aggressive fictions,” those which “bewilder and nauseate” the middle-class and convey the despair of contemporary American politics (6). Such texts disgust the larger public while fascinating a smaller group of sympathetic readers. Because this violence involves the human body, and because its perverseness renders the violence unspeakable in regular society, a textual intimacy develops between narrator and reader.

Perverse violence in literature functions like obscenity in speech. As Michael Adams explains in *In Praise of Profanity* (2016), we use words like fuck and shit in conversations unrelated to procreation and defecation because those actions are socially unacceptable to do in

1. Later in the novel, one of the narrator-protagonist’s eyes gets sucked out of its socket by the lips of a shape-shifting hyena woman. He replaces the eye with a wolf’s eye, part of what leads another character to call him Red Wolf.

public but also deeply connected to our bodies and our survival. Using these obscenities announce that our conversation is not sanctioned or official. We can discuss matters and opinions which might otherwise get us in trouble. Therefore, when I say, “fuck this shit,” the listener knows I am not talking about bodily functions, but that our conversation will have the same sort of intimacy as if I was.² Depending on context and delivery, I can attach the same sentiments (shock, embarrassment, revulsion, etc.) that such bodily functions provoke to the subject of my criticism, i.e. the target of my obscenity. Literary violence works the same way as my obscenity: it utilizes a corporeal action for a rhetorical argument. And the rarity of violence in middle-class America makes literary violence especially potent. Like preteens dropping F-bombs, literary violence utilizes a reference point that we know little about. Very few of us have intimate knowledge of violence, especially the sort of violence described above. The novelty of such violence lends itself to writing novels.

My project builds on the previous work of scholars dedicated to violence in 20th-century American literature. I am indebted to Sally Bachner’s *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction, 1962-2007* (2011). Bachner argues that postwar American literature has been preoccupied with a violence privileged by its absence. Such literature reflects the belief that language mediates and occludes our experience of the real, and that violence represents a prelinguistic and therefore authentic reality. These twin beliefs create a paradox in which violence garners prestige as a gateway to the real, but that prestige can only be maintained if violence remains inexpressible. In other words, you can talk around violence, but you cannot talk about violence, because that would destroy violence’s powerful mystique. Bachner identifies in canonical postwar novels a tendency to place violence on the edges of narratives as a sort of apparition which haunts the novel but never gets directly confronted. Violence occurs in the distant past, or in a distant country, or in a situation far removed from the lives of the novel’s principal characters. Bachner argues that the prestige of these novels lies in their reproduction of influential readers’ positionalities towards violence. Safe and comfortable in their middle and upper-class lives, these groups suspect that their security and affluence depend upon larger systems of violence just outside of their perception (or rather, just outside their willingness to look). They celebrate texts which reflect that viewpoint by representing violence as impactful but distant, as essential yet unspeakable. Bachner ties the mythological status of violence to the material circumstances of liberal arts departments in postwar universities, the predominance of poststructuralist and constructivist theories of language and meaning-making, the declining confidence in politicians and government spokespersons, and the rise of trauma theory. Bachner takes especial umbrage with this last cause. She finds Elaine Scarry’s notion that pain shatters language both unfounded and contradicted by her own examples. She finds Cathy Caruth’s privileging of survivor’s guilt in people absent from the traumatic event to be deeply problematic.³

2. These expletives are a modified example from *In Praise of Profanity*: “If, in talking with friends about my hostile work environment, I say, ‘I can’t take this shit anymore,’ would those friends judge the statement as ‘offensive’ or ‘indecent’? While the offense of shit doubtless depends on its supposed reference to feces, I don’t think they’d hear it as ‘indecent’ or take the shit as even obliquely referential” (24). Three things worth noting: 1) The listeners do not think of feces; 2) The statement is not taken as offensive; 3) The offensive of feces globbs onto the target of the speaker’s criticism, their workplace.

3. Bachner refers to Caruth’s reading of the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). The Japanese soldier absent from the Hiroshima bombing becomes Caruth’s model for the traumatic experience.

Bachner's takedown of Caruth helps to explain *The Prestige of Violence's* earlier assertion that postwar novels' employment of unspeakable violence "enables a deeply therapeutic and illusory reckoning with that violence" (5). By fashioning ourselves as survivors of a history that trauma theorist Shoshana Felman calls "our post-traumatic century" and Caruth calls "our own catastrophic age," we get to recast our apathy and inaction towards the suffering of others as healing and recovery (Bachner 20).

My chosen texts represent a departure from the privileging of unspeakable violence which Bachner critiques. Bachner cites McCarthy as an argument for violence's speakability, noting how he "endlessly demonstrates the way that violence can indeed be represented" (5). From spending the first twenty-five years of his career in obscurity to having *The Road* (2007) selected by Oprah's Book Club, McCarthy exemplifies how violence has become not only accepted but commended. Contemporary television drama, which resembles the novel in length and approach, reflects a similar critical approval.⁴ Some of the most acclaimed shows of the twenty-first century include a sociopathic mafia boss (*The Sopranos* (1999-2007)), a cabal of Baltimore drug traffickers (*The Wire* (2002-2008)), a science teacher turned meth manufacturer (*Breaking Bad* (2008-2013)), a frontier-era pimp and cutthroat (*Deadwood* (2004-2006)) and a fantasy civil war (*Game of Thrones* (2011-2019)). Most of these programs air on premium cable networks like HBO, which are exempt from the Federal Communication Commission's rules on obscenity and indecency. These rules increase the value of violence by literally making it more expensive to watch. But even though the concept of unspeakable violence now seems obsolete, Bachner's observations about class and distancing still warrant consideration. Three of my four selected texts are set in the distant past, a common occurrence in those author's works and a common occurrence in contemporary television.⁵ Each of those three authors (all but Wright) grew up in middle or upper-class households in safe neighborhoods. The graphicness of their violence does not mean their stories provide a more authentic experience of violence. My project explains how these writers use violence as a rhetorical device, but I do not judge whether their violence is "real." As I have stated, the rhetorical power of violence lies in how unequipped we are to judge its accuracy, how novel it feels against our own experiences.

Two scholars have written exceptional work on literary violence's relationship to masculinity. First, Maggie McKinley's *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75* (2015) considers how marginalized male protagonists employ violence to reclaim their masculinity in the novels of black and Jewish American writers. Utilizing existentialist ideas on gender from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), McKinley argues that these men seek "transcendence" from the emasculated positions assigned them by American racism or anti-Semitism (5). Each of these men share Beauvoir's belief in the necessity of violence for transcendence. Beauvoir writes, "Violence is the authentic proof of one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will; radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth" (331).

4. In saying the novel and the television drama share the same approach, I mean that they both use the smaller story of an individual or family to tell the larger story of a culture, place or time.

5. The list of period dramas on recent television is endless but includes: *Black Sails*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *Camelot*, *Da Vinci's Demons*, *Downton Abbey*, *Hell on Wheels*, *Mad Men*, *Magic City*, *Masters of Sex*, *Narcos*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Rome*, *Spartacus*, *The Borgias*, *The Deuce*, *The Get Down*, *The Tudors*, *Vikings* and *Vinyl*.

In other words, a liberated mind requires the use of force. However, the liberatory violence in McKinley's selected novels nearly always leads to despair and self-destruction. McKinley identifies this tragedy as the paradox of violence: by using violence to escape emasculation, these protagonists reproduce the brutal authority which they sought to destroy. I take a similar approach to McKinley in my chapter on Ken Levine's *BioShock Infinite* (2013), arguing that the protagonist's violence stems from a need to reclaim masculine authority over the life of his teenage daughter.

In her own reading of Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), McKinley notes the protagonist's misogyny and misogynistic violence go uncriticized by Wright, a tendency she finds common among her subjects. However, that misogyny only occurs in the novel's opening third; by the final third, the protagonist has devoted himself to a woman's love. Wright's novel borrows heavily from detective fiction, and the maturation of Wright's protagonist mirrors the theories on crime novels and masculinity developed by Greg Forter. Forter's *Murdering Masculinities: Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (2000) studies crime novels in which hegemonic masculinity, a hallmark of the genre, undergoes debasement and abjection through contact with the "disturbingly irresistible" presence of femininity (10). Forter's selected novels symbolize this process through encounters with corpses, feces, vomit and other abject material. *The Outsider* contains such content in its most transformational moments: page-long descriptions of garbage dumps and intimate encounters with fleshy, oozing corpses. Hume argues that in such moments "we are being pushed to submit and surrender to author and text, to accept the experience and not try to control the text or impose our own meaning and values on it. The message may even be that we should not expect meaning" (xiii). But Forter believes these graphic literary depictions constitute an anti-epistemological and nonpropositional knowledge of gender and ego which Freudian psychology attempted to deny or contain. Forter sources the birth of literary modernism and the crime novel to the same early twentieth-century white male anxieties over cultural change. Where modernism attempted to transcend those anxieties through aesthetic beauty and self-canonization, the crime novel debased itself in lowbrow culture and vulgar imagery. Through this debasement, the crime novel provides a more transcendent reckoning with that anxiety. Forter argues that the "psychic disquiet" these images provoke "is perhaps the necessary prerequisite to positive gender transformation," one which can be experienced by the presumed male reader (3). In addition, Forter's conception of subversive female resistance in James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009) informs my own reading of the novel. While obscene literary violence may desensitize us to violence, it can also help us transcend the structures of masculinity which enact such violence.

In this sense, Forter believes that literary violence can create a space of subversive resistance for the masculine subject. James R. Giles, much like McKinley, takes a more pessimistic approach to this liberatory power of violence. In *The Spaces of Violence* (2006), Giles focuses on how locations, both geographical and extra-geographical, shape representations of literary violence. Giles studies contemporary American fiction for its depictions of the systemic violence of male-dominated capitalist societies, as formulated by Redding, and the mythological violence of male-dominated religious societies, as formulated by René Girard.⁶ By "spaces," Giles refers to

6. Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) conceives of "sacrificial violence" as a means by which religious societies deal with "sacrificial crises," in other words, outbreaks of excessive reciprocal violence and breakdowns in

the tripart theory of spaces (physical, mental, representational) developed by Henry Lefebvre and modified by Edward W. Soja. For Soja, this third space of textual representation and social relations was a space of resistance, one in which marginalized groups could reach across boundaries and develop new ways of thinking and being. Giles introduces the concept of a fourth space, essentially like the third space but saturated by violence and robbed of its potential for resistance. Giles reads this fourth space in the violence of contemporary American fiction. Giles's disagreement with Soja over the interpretation of Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Aleph" (1945) captures my two different playthroughs of *BioShock Infinite*.⁷ Just like the lighthouses of *Infinite*, the titular device of "The Aleph" contains all possible permutations of the universe: "If all the places of the world are within the Aleph, there too will be all stars, all lamps, all sources of light" (127). Soja aligns with the first character who discovers the Aleph, the optimistic dreamer Argentino, and sees the third space of resistance. Giles aligns with the second character who discovers the Aleph, the pessimistic, fictionalized Borges, and sees the fourth space of violence. In my twin playthroughs of *Infinite*, the first enthralled and the second disgusted, I identify both spaces in the digital game world.

Other scholars have helped me to understand violence within the broader history of American literature. Larry J Reynolds's *Righteous Violence: Revolution, Slavery, and the American Renaissance* (2011) chronicles the way nineteenth-century American writers responded to the violence of slavery, slave insurrections, labor riots and the Civil War. These writers wrestled with a suspicion of the unchecked masses and a genuine desire for peace and order on the one hand, and a growing belief in the necessity of antislavery violence on the other. Benjamin S. West's *Crowd Violence in American Modernist Fiction: Lynchings, Riots and the Individual Under Assault* (2013) explains how literary depictions of crowd violence served the modernist project of documenting the perils of identity formation in a period of mass industrialization. Crowd violence symbolized how larger societal forces threatened individual expression and behavior, particularly for black and immigrant Americans accused of violating social codes of conduct. Jerry H. Bryant's *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (1997) catalogues the strategies by which black writers responded to the threat of interracial violence through fiction. This extended literary debate over violent and non-violent resistance informs my understanding of James's *Night Women*. While James and his characters are Jamaican, the violence he depicts occurred with the same frequency and brutality in the sugarcane fields of the American Deep South. And Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), the third book in his trilogy on frontier violence, deconstructs the romantic depictions of the American West that McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) sought to destroy. Slotkin reads the frontier as a mythical space that early-twentieth-century populists and progressives, and mid-twentieth-century Cold War policy makers, incorporated into their propaganda.

authority and meaning which threaten the society's collapse (49). Girard views violence much like Christianity views sin, as a universal network of behaviors which all trace back to an original act of violence outside of our understanding.

7. Both "The Aleph" and Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941) must have inspired the plot of *BioShock Infinite*. The latter short story contains a literary labyrinth, a narrative in which all possible outcomes and permutations are contained within the text.

Other than separating the authors by race, the four texts I discuss are presented in chronological order. The first chapter, “Failure and Social Death: Cross and His Creator in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*,” contemplates the critical and commercial failure of Wright’s first expatriate novel alongside the actions of its protagonist, Cross Damon. Cross, a disaffected Chicago postal worker, exploits a subway crash to fake his own death and start a new life in New York City. His fear of being discovered, and his pride at having escaped his working-class community, lead him to lash out violently against men who would pull him back into the social order. Borrowing from Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), I explain how Cross’s voluntary social death subversively resists the limitations placed upon black intellectuals in Cold War-era America.⁸ Cross’s self-expulsion grants him the freedom to peek into political and social movements—Communism and anti-Communism, racial segregation and racial solidarity—without fully committing himself to any particular cause. But his status as an outsider places himself and those around him in constant danger. Cross cannot occupy this spy-like role without disrupting his environment and destroying those within it, including himself and the woman he loves. Cross’s radical project fails, but his dying words convey a newfound belief that outsiders across the social strata must join together to fashion a new way of living, a replacement for the decaying structures of Western civilization.

For Wright, *The Outsider*’s reception constituted a profound public failure equivalent to the social death of its protagonist. Reviewers, including Wright’s friends and associates, were not kind. Over the last forty years, scholars have repeatedly attempted to defend the novel’s literary value against these criticisms. I explain why the original reviewers were right, pointing out the novel’s logical contradictions, hackneyed ideas, unlikable characters and overwrought descriptions. But I argue that Cross’s geographical and intellectual journey reflects Wright’s own experience through his immigration to Paris. Furthermore, I argue that the violence which results from Cross’s journey reflects the same violence with which Wright tears down the narrative conventions of his earlier, successful novels. The public failure of *The Outsider* helped Wright to break away from the expectations of his American public hungry for another salacious novel of black victimhood and criminality, another cathartic tragedy to ease white consciences. Much like his protagonist’s violence, *The Outsider*’s flaws represent an unpracticed, unwieldy transition into a new mode of being and relating to others, namely, as a non-fiction writer sharing and theorizing the struggles of the postcolonial colored elite, the outsiders of Cold War-era international politics. By reading *The Outsider* alongside Wright’s later non-fiction, particularly *White Man, Listen!* (1957), I contribute to the ongoing scholarly reassessment of Wright’s expatriate literature.

The second chapter, “‘The Dark Ages in the Colonies’: Fantasy and the Neo-Slave Narrative in Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women*,” borrows from scholarship on generic fantasy to explore James’s female-led slave revolt on a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Jamaican plantation. The novel shares a number of narratological similarities with generic fantasy, including the incorporation of supernatural elements, obscure prophecy and a quest narrative for self-

8. Patterson’s concept of black social death informs the contemporary scholarly movement known as Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism argues that Western institutions have assigned the role of “other” or “non-human” to the bodies of black individuals. Because of this, Afro-pessimism questions whether modern institutions can be used to achieve black uplift, a sort of “fruit of the poisonous tree doctrine” towards Western institutions devoted to liberalism and neo-liberalism.

actualization. Building on scholar David Scott's suggestion that anticolonial stories are most often emplotted as romance, I argue for the exceptionalism of *Night Women* as a grimdark romantic fantasy, a novel which tears down the romantic fantasies of both enslaver and enslaved.

Fantasy often romanticizes an ancient, unrecorded past and the values and practices associated with it. *Night Women* uses metatextual discourse, texts-within-text, to show how European proto-fantasy and chivalric romance inspired the medieval violence of the antebellum slave plantation. Similarly, *Night Women's* depiction of Maroon violence and slavecatching serves as an antiromantic rebuttal to the mythologization of the Maroons in contemporary Jamaican culture. Three generations of women—the narrator, Lovey; her mother/protagonist, Lilith; and Lilith's aged mentor, Homer—ultimately abandon Dark Age violence and enact a black Enlightenment through autobiography in the slave narrative form. Utilizing historical scholarship on slave rebellions in Jamaica and the British West Indies, I argue that these women represent the historical evolution of active resistance amongst Jamaica's enslaved population.

The third chapter, "The Authority of Ignorance: Scientism and Gnosticism in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," considers why McCarthy's philosophical novel about genocidal scalp hunters cultivated such an intense and divisive following among literary scholars. The rabidity with which scholars attempt to uncover and classify *Blood Meridian's* (1985) meaning mirrors the behavior of the novel's primary antagonist, the judge. I argue that the mystery and ambiguity which accompany the novel's meaning are intentional. The novel's voice, much like its reclusive author, avoids clarity and visibility in order to usurp authority over "truth" from larger cultural institutions. I borrow from scholarship on agnotology, the study of ignorance, to explain this point, particularly the work of philosopher Charles Mills. *Blood Meridian* uses historical reference points and scientific language to produce an authoritative voice. Poetic devices provide a pleasurable sonic coherence which encourages readers to accept this authority. Collectively, these strategies persuade readers to accept the novel's ideas about man's capacity for evil and the inevitability of violence. In turn, these ideas work to delegitimize institutions which have historically benefited from violence while hypocritically preaching against its usage. *Blood Meridian's* most frequent target for such criticism is the Catholic Church. I connect the novel's rhetorical strategies to those of early gnostic theologians arguing against the Orthodox Church, as well as to modern philosophers who incorporated gnostic thought. The connections add to the larger conversation amongst McCarthy scholars about the role of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Hegel in McCarthy's work.

The fourth chapter, "The Family and the Body Politic: Racial and Sexual Violence in *BioShock Infinite*," examines how political revolution threatens the heteronormative family in Ken Levine's wildly successful first-person shooter videogame. The game's two primary antagonists, Daisy Fitzroy and Father Comstock, are based on historical movements—1970s black radicalism and 19th-century Mormonism, respectively—recognized as corrupting forces on a white daughter's virginal purity. While some critics viewed *Infinite* as an anti-violence narrative wrapped in a violent videogame, *Infinite* fights against politics as a rebuttal to the decades of finger-pointing at videogame violence by American politicians. As a postmodern videogame, *Infinite* lays a plethora of political, historical and literary reference points on top of the classic gaming narrative of a man rescuing a princess from a castle.

I close read three scenes—the raffle, Fitzroy’s death and Elizabeth’s torture—to identify the symbols by which racial and sexual violence work to justify the player’s violent gameplay. I explain how the demographic homogeneity of videogame developers and the financial constraints of AAA game development fuel these problematic scenes. Finally, I suggest that extensive videogame narratives are an impermanent market trend, and that ludic narratives chosen by players could replace the narrative choices made by developers.

Some readers find the violence in these texts literally impossible to stomach. I hope to prove that such nausea is intentional. In *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1979), Stanley Cavell notes how esoteric logic in modernist philosophy separates its readers into camps: “such works seek to split their audience into insiders and outsiders (and split each member of it); hence they create the particular unpleasantness of cults (at best as a specific against the particular unpleasantness of indifference or intellectual promiscuousness, combatting partialness by partiality); hence demand for their sincere reception the shock of conversion” (loc. 173-75). In other words, the difficulty of reading such philosophy drives even the most patient skeptics away. Those readers who remain, who sincerely dive in and devour the text, are exclusively those readers who experienced an early shock of conversion. They become devout followers. My project argues that perverse violence, typified by the opening scenes of ocular violence detailed above, provides that same rhetorical shock.

CHAPTER 1.

FAILURE AND SOCIAL DEATH: CROSS AND HIS CREATOR IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *THE OUTSIDER*

Can bad writing can be a form of protest? Imagine the original Fisk Jubilee Singers performing for a crowd of former slaveholders. Singing offkey or mumbling the words would be an act of subversive resistance, an unwillingness to entertain an unethical, undeserving public. Thinking over the tradition of black American protest fiction and consciousness-raising art, one does not normally associate “mucking it up” with revolutionary action. But intentional sabotage as a form of subversive resistance goes back to slavery itself. And sometimes canonical black writers set the course for their literary careers by giving up: August Wilson dropping out of high school after a racist accusation of plagiarism or Ralph Ellison abandoning his music degree at the stiflingly conservative Tuskegee Institute. Dave Chappelle cancelling his television show and going to Africa. These writers found the cultural expectations and limitations placed upon their work to be unbearable, so they left. But what about failure on a grander scale: an internationally recognized performer, a Fisk Jubilee-level talent, profoundly failing at their craft?

The narrative of Tod Clifton in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) exemplifies the type of intentional failure I mean to explore in this chapter. The charismatic Clifton devotes his life to organizing black youth for the Communist Party-like Brotherhood. After an impassioned chastisement by a West Indian radical, Clifton abandons the Party and resorts to selling dancing Sambo puppets on a street corner. Readers might interpret this as tragic. Presumably Clifton could find a less degrading way to make a living. But Ellison's protagonist notices how the Sambo's dancing looks like an act of rebellious subversion, “seeing the doll throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received a perverse pleasure from its motions” (431). Clifton, not the doll, performs the degrading public act. He debases himself and his reputation to take back control of his art, his voice. Clifton looks at the protagonist with a “contemptuous smile” (431). His smile says to the protagonist, who still works for the Brotherhood, *at least I am honest about dancing for white folks*. At least Clifton decides how and when to dance. Tod Clifton's minstrelsy enacts an intentional failure of the Brotherhood's standards. His minstrelsy constitutes a voluntary social death, a public act so perverse to their tenets that even after Clifton's literal death they label him a traitor and chastise the protagonist for holding a funeral.

In 1957, after four non-fiction books over four years had each flopped in the American marketplace, Richard Wright confided to longtime friend and translator Margrit de Sablonière that he was resigned to a life of storytelling. Wright laments:

I suspect that I'll have to stick to fiction for a long time now for, as I told you, my books on world affairs are not really wanted [...] My book *White Man, Listen!* has been more or less negatively received in the USA. They hate the book, yet it tells the truth. Then why should I go on writing books that folks will not read? I'm sorry to sound so depressing but one must look facts straight in the face.⁹ (Fabre 456)

Wright overstated the prevailing American interest in his fiction. His last two novels published during that same span were modest successes at best, and his next novel, *The Long Dream* (1958),

9. Wright says his New York editor, Cass Canfield, made a similar judgement about *Black Power* (1954): “Richard, this is a fine book, but I do not believe that the white audience in the US will enter a bookstore and pay four dollars in order to read a book about something which does not really interest them” (Kinnamon and Fabre 225).

would sell poorly. And he understated the wider interest in his non-fiction: *White Man, Listen!* (1957) was well-received in Europe, and the Continent continued to hold Wright's opinions on race in high esteem. But in 1957 Wright felt compelled, if not forced, to be a storyteller. Fiction writing provided Wright his only means to confront the American public with politics and the only means to provide himself a modest income.

But Wright would decide how and when to dance. He did so in 1940 by offending conservative black sentiment with the salacious criminality of *Native Son*. He did so in 1943 by publicly breaking with the Party in dramatic fashion with "I Tried to Be a Communist." He did so in 1950 by appalling *Ebony* publisher John H. Johnson with a scathing expatriate critique, "The Shame of Chicago." And he did so in 1953 with *The Outsider*, an extended meditation on existentialist thought and postcolonial consciousness that masqueraded as a crime novel. Wright knew the novel would sell poorly. He writes to his agent Paul Reynolds: "My hopes for [*The Outsider*] are not great; indeed I cannot conceive of anybody liking it, especially Americans ... It is grim. It is not hopeful and it travels along a path that avoids popular conclusions" (Fabre 367). But in his diary, Wright confesses a sense of urgency about sharing the novel's ideas with his public.¹⁰ I contend, as have most critics, that Wright produced a mediocre slog of a book. Like my hypothetical Jubilee singers, Wright sang an offkey, mumbling blues to an American public salivating for the next *Native Son*. In doing so, he killed his reputation as the greatest black American novelist ever discovered.

Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1985) explains how the social death of the enslaved secured the institution of slavery. Slave masters needed the public (their neighbors and fellow citizens, their government, and even the slaves themselves) to recognize the slave as a non-being undeserving of rights and privileges. Patterson writes that while the entire slave-master relationship produces symbols which confer this non-being, "there is overwhelming concentration on the profound natal alienation of the slave" (loc. 980). This natal alienation takes form in the slave's removal from their homeland and their families, and their expulsion from the myths and origin stories of the master's people. Patterson continues: "The reason for this is not hard to discern: it was the slave's isolation, his strangeness, that made him most valuable to the master; but it was [also] this very strangeness that most threatened the community" (loc. 980). A slave can be forced to labor without pay or fair treatment because they are an outsider, but a slave must also be carefully watched and controlled because they are an outsider. Strangers are dangerous and must be surveilled.

In *The Outsider* (1953), Wright's protagonist voluntarily enacts his own social death by allowing society to believe he died in a subway crash. Wright stages this death as a birth scene, as the trapped fetus of a black intellectual violently clawing its way out of a broken metal womb. Cross lays pinned in the steel wreckage of the train car, surrounded by the corpses of fellow men and women. His fight against bodies pinning him in produces all the blood, sweat, and viscera of a literal pregnancy:

Sweat broke out on his face and rivulets of water oozed from his armpits. He opened his eyes; the bloody face had sunk only a few inches; the nostrils, teeth, chin and eyes were pulped and blackened. Cross sucked in his breath; a few more blows would dislodge it. He shut his eyes and hammered again and suddenly he heard a splashing thud and he knew that the head had given way, for his blows were now falling on air...He looked; the

10. Wright writes: "I felt more than ever than that the kind of book I'm writing is needed [...] We seem to live on the sheer edge of an old world going to pot [...] So, any idea as to the future, then, is of great value, of general value and need, and any rejection of the past of great value is therefore precious" (Fabre 314).

mangled face was on the floor; most of the flesh had been ripped away and it already appeared skeletonlike. He had done it; he could move his leg [...] He crept forward over the ceiling of the overturned coach, past twisted and bloody forms, crunching shattered electric bulbs under his feet, feeling his shoes slopping through sticky liquid. He moved on tiptoe, as though afraid of waking the sleeping dead. He reached the window and saw that a young woman's body had been crushed almost flat just beneath it. The girl was dead, but, if he was to get through that window, he had either the choice of standing upon her crushed body or remaining where he was. He stepped upon the body, feeling his shoes sinking into the lifeless flesh and seeing blood bubbling from the woman's mouth as his weight bore down on her bosom. (96-97)

Cross must brutalize the bodies of his fellow passengers in order to leave the subway, a symbol of early twentieth-century industrial ingenuity. His escape from the wreck, his acceptance of the false reports of his death, and his journey to New York enact the same sort of natal alienation Patterson describes in the production of slavery's symbols: a removal from his birthplace and his family, and an expulsion of his place in the public record. But like Tod Clifton, Cross makes these decisions voluntarily. He chooses social death. In doing so, he opens a window to new possibilities and ways of thinking, but he also places himself in great danger. He must constantly watch his speech and actions to avoid discovery. And like Tod Clifton, this will lead to violence against figures of authority and his own untimely death.

Such need for secrecy produces in Cross a constant state of anxiety and a constant desire to eliminate threats with murder. Here I follow Joseph Keith's advice to "read the dilemma of Cross's 'black secret' in this theoretical frame as an allegory for the dilemma facing Wright himself in the writing of the novel" (98). Cross undertakes a "pathological destructiveness" to keep himself from being discovered by authority's watchful eye, to keep himself from being dragged back into the symbolic metal womb of modernity, back into the clutches of his mother, wife and girlfriend, back into his sleepwalk as a postal worker (Keith 100). Wright, too, undertakes that same pathological destructiveness in the rhetorical strategies of his early expatriate writing. Abdul JanMohamed notes that Cross's coworkers call him "Mr. Death" and tell stories of his "deep desire to be a god among humans" (loc. 3327). Through murder and destructiveness Cross becomes Death itself, a symbol for loss and decay. Wright took on that same role of Death in "The Shame of Chicago," focusing on the dirt and detritus of the city's streets and air.¹¹ In *The Outsider*, he devotes a 267-word sentence to describing the contents of a garbage can (145-146). And Wright's deathlike role as *The Outsider's* creator extends beyond images of violence and decay. Wright damages the story itself. He stretches out simple ideas into long-winded sentences and speaks in the almost incoherent language of existentialism. He introduces contradictions without explanation and coincidences without logic. He spectacularly fails to live up to his status as one of America's greatest living novelists. He commits social death. But in that death, he becomes a literary outlaw. He changes the course of his writing from popular fiction to postcolonial non-fiction. He begins to produce books and essays in the spirit of his removal to Paris. And in this sense, social death becomes an act of subversive resistance.

11. *Ebony's* editor John H. Johnson waited fifteen months to publish "The Shame of Chicago," and included his own rebuttal alongside the essay, because of his anger at Wright's descriptions. Wright writes: "How does Chicago strike one after twelve years? Truthfully, there is but one word for it: ugliness. An incredible ugliness which I had not been aware of while living in Chicago twelve years before. Chicago looked dull and grey under a leaden September sky. The dirt, garbage, orange peels, empty cigarette packages, scraps of newspaper that littered the streets all but took my breath away" (26).

Following a summary of *The Outsider's* plot, I will lay out my reasons for believing *The Outsider* to be a bad novel. I will point to contemporary reviews and the current scholarly debate over the novel's literary value. I will connect the story of Cross Damon to the life of Richard Wright. I will explain the novel's relationship to the existentialist books in Cross's library. And I will connect *The Outsider's* ideas to Wright's subsequent postcolonial non-fiction. I consider how philosophical discussions of violence and independence play out in these texts. I hope to prove that one can criticize the failure of *The Outsider* while still celebrating the literary transformation it helped Wright to undertake.

Cross Damon, *The Outsider*

Cross Damon, a black postal employee on the South Side of Chicago, has turned to thoughts of suicide. He lives separate from his wife and three children, drinks heavily, and faces a statutory rape charge from his pregnant fifteen-year-old girlfriend, Dot. His wife coerces him into taking an \$800 loan from the post office to buy her silence about Dot's condition. But on the subway ride home his train crashes, and the authorities mistakenly identify him among the deceased. Cross uses this opportunity, along with the loan money, to start a new life. He briefly stays at a hotel of ill-repute, where he encounters a friendly coworker, Joe. Cross kills Joe to avoid discovery, dumping his body onto an adjoining rooftop. Cross hops a train to New York, along which he meets the famed New York District Attorney Ely Houston. They strike up a friendly conversation and find they share the same philosophical ideas: the double consciousness of black Americans, the meaninglessness of civilization, and the terror of knowing that man may be anything or nothing in particular. Cross's blackness and Houston's hunchback make them both natural outsiders, kindred spirits.

Cross also encounters a West Indian porter and Communist, Bob Hunter. Bob believes that Cross is on the lam for killing a white man, so he introduces Cross to a white Communist couple, Gil and Eva, in hopes of recruiting him to the Party. Gil's coldhearted abuse of Bob infuriates Cross, but Eva possesses a quiet beauty and innocence that draws him in. Gil asks Cross to stay with them in order to desegregate their building and infuriate their Fascist landlord, Herndon. Cross agrees. In conversation and in covert reading of her diary, Cross learns more about Eva: she paints nonobjective art, she is an orphan, and Gil only married her to serve the Party's interests. The next day Herndon discovers Cross in the building, and a terrible fight ensues in Herndon's apartment between Herndon and Gil. Cross enters the apartment, sees both men badly wounded and bashes their skulls in with a table leg. He kills them because they are cruel, coercive, exploitative men. But more importantly, he kills them because killing does not matter to Cross. District Attorney Houston arrives to investigate the murders and is pleasantly surprised to find Cross. They discuss the facts of the case as equals. Later that night another Communist, Hilton, spies Cross disposing of bloody evidence in the furnace. This same Hilton reported Bob Hunter to immigration authorities for going against the Party position, damning Bob to death in a West Indian prison. Cross breaks into Hilton's apartment, retrieves the evidence and waits for Hilton to return. He shoots Hilton in the head and stages the scene to look like a suicide. He returns to Eva's apartment and attempts to confess, but Eva does not believe him. They make love. At this point both the local Communist Party leader and District Attorney Houston suspect Cross in the murders, and both men interrogate Cross at length. Houston discovers Cross's past and confronts him with his wife and children but still cannot connect him to the murders. Cross returns to Eva, who now knows everything, including the truth of his previous confession. Horrified by the situation, Eva

kills herself by jumping off a balcony. Houston explains to Cross that Eva's suicide has removed any doubt about Cross's guilt. But Houston declines to prosecute, citing a lack of concrete evidence, and instead damns Cross to live with his crimes unpunished, to face the meaninglessness of the violence he committed. Walking away from the police station, a Communist enforcer ambushes Cross and shoots him. On Cross's deathbed, Houston asks him what life was like. Cross responds that life was horrible because he always felt innocent. "It...It was...horrible," Cross whispers, "All of it [...] Because in my heart...I'm...I felt...I'm *innocent*...That's what made the horror" (586).

Cross's final words make no narratological sense. The narrator has repeatedly described Cross feeling guilty. Early in the novel, seeing his mother's prematurely aged appearance and knowing his actions were responsible provokes in Cross "sullen and guilty anger," "a feeling of defensive guilt," "a shameful mood of guilt," and "made him feel guilty" (23, 24, 26, 29). The thought of leaving his wife "made him feel guilty" (69). On the train, Cross wonders if Houston realizes "how lost and guilty and scared he was" (169). Feeling alone and weighing Joe's murder, "it was to a sense of guilt that [Cross's] heart leaped" (196). The narrator expands upon Cross's "guilt" after the murders of Gil and Herndon in a particularly verbose, overwrought sentence.¹² Cross "felt guilty" lying to Eva about the murder (317). He wonders if "his guilt [was] the more because he was alone," resigns himself "to tread this guilty treadmill alone" and worries that "killing would only sink him deeper into these quicksands of guilt" (318). Cross's relationship with Eva fails because of "a wall not of race but of mutual guilt" (351). For Cross to then state upon his deathbed that life was horrible because he felt and still feels himself innocent, he must claim a condition which contradicts everything the reader knows about his mental state.

Wright intends to produce a damning thought in readers' minds: claiming innocence, denying responsibility in the world's suffering, only results in a terrible day of reckoning. Wright offered the same thoughts on innocence near the end of *Native Son*. At Bigger Thomas's trial, his lawyer blames Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton on the Dalton family's refusal to bear responsibility for their discriminatory housing practices.¹³ The lawyer proclaims: "The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich. And Mr. Dalton, a decent man, tried to salve his feelings by giving money. But, my friend, gold was not enough! Corpses cannot be bribed! Say to yourself, Mr. Dalton, 'I offered my daughter as a burnt sacrifice and it was not enough to push back into its grave this thing that haunts me'" (loc. 7646). Unfortunately, the quality of Wright's prose betrays the message he intended it to convey. Readers experience catharsis through the theatrical spectacle of Bigger's trial and the soaring oration of the lawyer's speech. A respectable white man delivers Wright's social criticism in palatable form and beautiful imagery. In *The Outsider*, the black criminal voices the twenty-page lecture on Western society's crimes, his motives never quite add up, and his final message on guilt makes no narratological sense. *The Outsider* provides no catharsis or pleasure. We do not enjoy Wright's story.

12. The sentence in question: "After an arduous journey of experience it is not good to stare in dismay at a world that one was creating without being aware of it, and there is no chastening of the spirit so severely sobering as that rankling sense of *guilt* that springs from a knowledge of having been snared into the mire of disillusionment when one thought that one was soaring on wings of intellectual pride to a freedom remote from the errors and frailties of the gullible" (310, emphasis added). In short, Cross's conscience betrays him. Cross thought his rejection of societal ethics would raise him to an enlightened state, and since that failed, he now sinks back to a guilty state.

13. Bigger Thomas, a delinquent black teenager, murders the daughter of his employer in order to prevent being discovered in her bed. Bigger disposes of her body in the family furnace, hence the appropriateness of calling Mary's body a burnt sacrifice.

Wright holds a place among the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century. But in *The Outsider*, he indulges in long sentences loaded with indeterminate nouns and abstract concepts to express simple ideas. Here Wright explains how the police cannot catch Cross without thinking like Cross:

[Cross's] crimes constituted so decisive a divergence from the plane of ordinary moral considerations, stemmed from so weird an angle of perspective that he who would find him guilty must needs go so far as to place himself at that same point of vision that he had had while committing his crimes; and that person, his accuser, would automatically and of necessity have to become entangled in the very guilt he would denounce! (410-11).

Wright's sentence borrows from two timeworn ideas: the duality of cop and criminal, and the flexible cliché "to catch an [X], you must think like an [X]." ¹⁴ The violence with which Wright wrenches these simple tropes from detective fiction into philosophical observations betrays a writer disinterested in satisfying readers. ¹⁵ Wright preferred to painfully deconstruct in stretched-out sentences the disease-like transmission of guiltiness, rather than provide a simple, digestible expository sentence. In another sentence torturous to read, Wright explains crippling anxiety: "Imprisoned he was in a state of consciousness that was so infatuated by its own condition that it could not dominate itself; so swamped was he by himself with himself that he could not break forth from behind the bars of that self to claim himself" (149). Wright borrows a simple, timeworn analogy for worry: a prison of the mind. But again, he stretches that analogy into a nine-pronoun sentence with almost as many varieties of "-self" as Heidegger had of "being-." ¹⁶ Such language captures the fractured state of Cross's mind but makes for terribly bad prose. The bad prose ruins the aesthetic enjoyment characteristic to Wright's earlier works and requires the reader to either put the book down or painfully, laboriously consider the philosophical ideas underpinning the story.

Wright ignored whatever responsibility he felt to the non-intellectual American public hungry for another race tragedy like *Native Son*. He intentionally failed to deliver a sympathetic black martyr like the characters of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) or a pitiable black villain like Bigger Thomas. He leaned on contradictions and coincidences to the point of breaking the novel's narrative logic. He employed bloated, distended sentences filled with abstract concepts and repetitive pronouns. These flaws ruined the novel's critical and commercial reception but captured the sort of fractured worrying about self and society Wright was working through in his own life. And they allowed Wright to infect *The Outsider* with the philosophical and political ideas he felt America needed to know.

14. To borrow a line from Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002): "You explore the notion that cop and criminal are really two aspects of the same person. See every cop movie ever made for other examples of this!"

15. For more on Wright's debt to genre fiction, see William E. Dow's "Pulp Gothicism in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," Doyle W. Walls's "The Clue Undetected in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," and Rachel Watson's "The Living Clue: Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953)."

16. Jeffery Atteberry finds that *The Outsider's* existentialism is "plainly Heideggerian," and that Cross's problematic relationship of himself to himself is "is nothing more than the problem or the question which Heidegger says Dasein essentially is" (882, 885). *Dasein* refers to Heidegger's unique conception of the self.

An Expatriate Failure

For decades, critics have attempted minor reclamation projects of *The Outsider's* literary value, choosing to focus on, as Floyd W. Hayes III lists, its contribution to discussions of "French existentialism, double consciousness/double vision, Kierkegaardian dread, the Nietzschean overman, Marxism, the Communist Party USA, God's death, images and roles of black women, nihilism, resentment, racism, man's search for freedom, Wright's use of Dostoevsky, antiblack violence, and the threat of death" (loc. 1435). Essays on *The Outsider* often begin with a defense of its literary merits. Kingsley Widmer bemoans the "unphilosophical, puzzled, and negative discussions" of the novel. Widmer claims *The Outsider* "achieves much more" than Wright's first two novels and "deserve[s] consideration among the few substantial long fictions by Negroes" (13). Robert A. Coles argues that "*The Outsider* does not mark the first step in a decline in Wright's literary career" but is rather "a unique novel that contains its own strengths and merits" (53). Michael F. Lynch laments that the novel "has been treated unfairly as *Native Son's* poor cousin" (255). Jeffrey Atteberry believes "the negative evaluations that have been passed on the novel" are "made in the absence of any rigorous examination" and "hasty if not ill-conceived" (883). Writing in 2010, Rachel Watson notes that "though renewed critical interest in the novel has improved its reputation of late, most still view the novel as a deeply flawed work, aesthetically and politically" (56). Watson argues that "the force of the novel" appears in the "irreversible paradoxes" that so often confused critics (56). Such reclamation projects constitute a larger effort to come to terms with Wright's peculiar literary legacy. *Native Son* remains one of the most important works of twentieth-century African American literature, and Wright's second novel, *Black Boy* (1945), is still routinely taught in high schools and colleges. But the eight books written after Wright's exodus to Paris sold poorly during their initial publication and have gone largely unread by anyone other than literary scholars. One could be forgiven for assuming that Wright stopped writing at the age of thirty-seven.

In trying to reclaim the importance of Wright's later works, which this chapter partially attempts to do, a natural impulse exists to discount the prophetic warnings of Wright's friends, who believed that his escape from America would lead to the decline of his talent for telling stories. Nelson Algren attempted to talk him out of it, as did Albert Camus and Albert Mangonès, themselves expatriates, and Ralph Ellison testily declined Wright's written encouragement to make the same trip.¹⁷ "I am getting a little sick," Ellison wrote back, "of American Negroes running over for a few weeks and coming back insisting that its [sic] paradise. My answer to them is that my problems are the problems of a writer and that if a trip across to France would solve those, I would make it tomorrow."¹⁸ Regardless of the social and material advantages that France provided to black American expatriates, Wright's friends felt his fiction writing would suffer as a result.

Unfortunately, *The Outsider* did little to change their minds. Ellison would later state that Wright's removal to Paris "didn't improve his fiction; in fact, it helped encourage some very bad tendencies in his writing."¹⁹ Reviewers of *The Outsider* agreed, as did most of Wright's friends

17. Rowley 381, 352, 327; Fabre 298.

18. Rowley 407. From a Ralph Ellison letter to Richard Wright, 21 January 1953. Additional information can be found in Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 8090.

19. Rowley 409. From a 1963 Ellison interview with Allen Geller.

and colleagues. James Baldwin believed Wright's first expatriate novel to be "a pretentious bore," Simone de Beauvoir called it "a meaningless, crazy, stupid story," and Algren thought Wright had made "a very bad mistake."²⁰ Lorraine Hansberry declared publicly that "Wright has lost his own dignity and destroyed his talents"; Arna Bontemps found the novel muddled and mediocre: "knowing Wright, one soon suspects that he knows where [*The Outsider*] is going. But one is mistaken."²¹ For the first time in his life, after a string of critical and commercial successes, a consensus formed that Wright had failed as a writer.

They were not entirely wrong; or, at the very least, Wright's writing process suggests that *The Outsider* was destined for trouble. Whereas Ellison had spent ten years crafting *Invisible Man*, Wright had spent just six months on *The Outsider*: two months in 1947, just before he left New York for Paris; two months in early spring of 1952, under pressures both financial and contractual; and two months in the fall of 1952, during which he cut 120 pages out of his 740-page manuscript.²² He wrote little else within that five-year period, as he "did not feel like writing ... I did not want to force myself. To me, writing comes freely or not at all."²³ It was a marked change from a writer who, earlier in his career, alienated his family by devoting himself to nightly writing exercises. Wright workshopped his stories so frequently that friends and lovers became annoyed: "I was impressed," recalled Joyce Gourfain, a Communist with whom Wright had a brief affair in 1934, "until he read his stuff so many times in the house I got sick of it. 'Down by the Riverside.' He read that, I betcha, twenty times in my house. If a new person was there, if the rest of us had heard it ten times before, out comes the manuscript and we had to hear it again. I got so fed up with it."²⁴ By 1950, the tireless dedication Wright displayed during his time with Chicago's South Side Writers Group had been subsumed by non-literary endeavors.

These endeavors included familial, romantic, social and political obligations afforded, in part, by his tremendous professional success. Wright blamed his writer's block on the stress of "pulling up one's roots in one country and planting them in another," but for a man with multiple domestic servants, a small fortune in royalties, and no fixed employment, how stressful could it have been?²⁵ Rather, it seems Wright used those five years of literary inactivity to enjoy himself: to see and be seen by café society; to fall under the spell of Gertrude Stein (and later, to be disillusioned); to, for a brief period, be the doting head of a middle-class nuclear family; to engage in a series of extramarital affairs; to travel the world; to indulge his curiosity with filmmaking (in

20. Rowley 409. The Algren quote comes from a winter 1995 interview in the *Paris Review*, "The Art of Fiction." Algren continues: "[Wright's] trying to write as an intellectual, which he isn't basically ... He's trying his best to write like a Frenchman."

21. Keith loc. 1681, Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 7909.

22. Rowley 354, 406.

23. Rowley 376.

24. Rowley 93.

25. Rowley 376. Fabre 313-15 for more on Wright's distractions, as well as 595-96 for evidence from Wright's diary. On August 21, 1947, Wright laments he is "beginning to feel fatalistic about Paris" and exclaims, "What a country! Looks like I'm in for wasting another day!" On September 22, 1947, Wright complains about a night in a Paris café: "I did not want to go home [to bed], but I wanted something that would nourish me. That is what I am missing, nourishing experiences."

an ill-fated Argentine version of *Native Son*, the forty-year-old Wright played the eighteen-year-old Bigger Thomas); and finally, in the words of Horace Cayton, to be “the most interviewed American in Paris.”²⁶ France allowed Wright to step inside a life that had been previously off-limits, to experience the basic comfort and security taken for granted by white bourgeois Americans. The hardships of his Southern childhood are well-documented in *Black Boy*, but even as a successful author in New York, the most cosmopolitan of American cities, Wright was regularly subjected to racism: “nigger” muttered under the breaths of passers-by, sugar replaced with salt in diner coffee, segregated bathrooms and hotels, physical threats against his white wife for race-mixing, and the need to establish a fake identity (a faceless corporation) in order to purchase a home.²⁷ Wright’s inactivity in Paris was fueled by a desire to live what more fortunate folks might term a regular life. And when his bank account dwindled, and his contractual obligations became pressing, Wright scrambled to flesh out *The Outsider*, a book his wife, agent, editor, and many of his friends thought seriously flawed.

Existentialist Guilt

The flaws of *The Outsider* may not have directly resulted from Wright’s decision to leave the States, but they did perform the same function: to estrange Wright from the American public. The broad strokes of Cross’s journey (claustrophobia, infidelity, guilt, exodus, transformation, fall) mirrored the conflicts Wright himself faced in the years prior to *The Outsider*’s publication. Connecting the novel’s protagonist to Wright’s life and politics, making “a bridge from man to man” as Cross wishes for in the novel’s closing scene, allows Wright’s protagonist to represent more than mere wanton sociopathy (585).²⁸ Wright uses violence to fictionalize the profound break occurring between American society and himself. Cross certainly plays the part: he kills four men, almost kills three more, indirectly kills his mother and his lover, beats his wife, abandons his children, steals from his job, burns down a church, and impregnates a fifteen-year-old girl. He calculates and weighs these crimes with the sort of cold detachment we usually ascribe to serial killers. To be clear, Cross is a serial killer, in the most literal sense, regardless of whatever social and political justifications he provides.²⁹ Like his name, he is daemonic, in his cruelty and his rejection of Christianity. And he is crossed in multiple senses of the word: angry, cursed, burdened, outcast and ultimately crucified. Cross’s violence appears remarkably different from the pacifistic

26. Rowley 346. Fabre 302-7 for more on Wright’s reception in Paris.

27. Rowley 349-50, Fabre 310-12, Webb 258-62, Gayle 195.

28. Joseph Keith draws a similar conclusion in “The Epistemology of Unbelonging: Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and the Politics of Secrecy.” Keith questions why “the narrative of violence in the novel was interpreted as both politically and aesthetically in *bad form*” by early reviewers (101). Keith concludes *The Outsider*’s violence illuminates the tragic limitations on “*narrative possibilities*” available to subalterns and argues that “Cross and Wright resort to violence” because of a lack of models for expression.

29. In *Profiling and Serial Crimes: Theoretical and Practical Issues* (2005), Wayne Petherick identifies the “popular operational definition” of serial killing as when “the same person (persons) commits three or more murders with a cooling-off period intervening” (342). The cooling-off period separates serial killing from killing sprees and the time required can be defined arbitrarily by researchers. The cooling-off period designates “the first killing has temporarily satisfied whatever motives are driving the killer, and the subsequent killings are part of a separate sequence of behaviors” (342).

activism and intellectualism of Wright's own life. But the chaotic force with which Cross disrupts his environment mirrors Wright's rhetorical behavior towards ideologies he opposed.

Cross's intellectualism links him together with Wright and separates him from the violent and violated characters of Wright's earlier stories.³⁰ Cross understands the psychological, historical, and sociological reasons behind why he kills. His elite Western education (as a student at the University of Chicago, and as an avid reader of philosophy and literature) allows him to understand his world, manipulate others' actions and manage his underlying sense of dread at being trapped or discovered. Those same reading practices ultimately connect him to his crimes, according to his antagonist, New York District Attorney Ely Houston: "Your Nietzsche, your Hegel, your Jaspers, your Heidegger, your Husserl, your Kierkegaard, and your Dostoevsky [...] I said to myself that we are dealing with a man who has wallowed in guilty thought" (560).³¹ Each of these writers contributed to the existentialist philosophy of guilt contained in *The Outsider's* pages. *The Outsider* borrows much of its premise and plot from *Crime and Punishment*. In Dostoevsky's novel, the protagonist Raskolnikov murders a cruel pawnbroker but finds himself wracked with guilt. Detective Porfiry Petrovich, like Houston in *The Outsider*, suspects Raskolnikov because of his philosophical leanings: Raskolnikov published an essay arguing that great thinkers may break the laws of men to pursue their ideas. Raskolnikov unburdens himself by confessing to the innocent prostitute Sonya, much like Cross unburdens himself by confessing to the innocent orphan Eva. Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* discusses guilt through the conflict between Antigone and Creon over her criminal burial of Polynices. Much like Cross's conception of "ethical murder" and the "ethical criminal," Hegel links guilt and the ethical consciousness together. Hegel argues that both were strongest when the criminal "knows beforehand the law and the power against which it takes an opposing stance, takes them to be violence and wrong, to be an ethical contingency, and then, like Antigone, knowingly commits the crime" (311, 466, Hegel 255). In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard traces anxiety to the problem of infinite possibilities, much like Cross faking his death and starting anew, finding himself incapable of plotting a course of action.³² Kierkegaardian guilt subsequently comes from making a concrete choice and abandoning the infinite, much like Cross murdering Gil and Herndon, irrevocably altering the new life he hoped to pursue. In this sense, Kierkegaardian guilt serves as an "attribute of liberty," a reminder of the consequences of free choice (Rovaletti 485). Heidegger's *Being and Time* describes the alienated man's conscience as a calling, a voice which calls him back from "the public idle talk of the 'they'" who are "lost in the manifold 'world' of its concern" and treat him as an outsider (loc. 9115). Acting on impulses which cause the conscience to cry out "Guilty!" lead to nothing of substance, but in that nothingness man connects to his authentic self.³³ Cross

30. In addition to the violence of *Native Son*, four of the five stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) feature black characters killing and being killed by white men. In the exception, "Fire and Cloud," a black preacher is kidnapped and beaten by white men for choosing to march with Communists, but he survives the assault.

31. Houston knows that a man who reads Hegel's "Ethical Action, Human and Divine Knowing, Guilt and Fate" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807); Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844); Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866); Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887); Heidegger's "Understanding the Appeal, and Guilt" in *Being and Time* (1927) and Jaspers' *The Question of German Guilt* (1946) clearly has matters of guiltiness, angst, and criminality on his mind.

32. Wright once told C.L.R. James: "Look here Nello, you see those [Kierkegaard] books there? ... Everything that he writes in those books I knew before I had them" (James 196).

33. Miller 99-104.

experiences the same unfortunate condition in his quest for a new way of living: each time he acts on socially unacceptable impulses, he only finds himself wracked with more guilt. And yet by wallowing in this guilt, Cross inches closer to a truer understanding of his ontological condition.

Earlier critics have thoroughly mapped *The Outsider's* connections to its antecedents, i.e. to the writers from Cross's personal library.³⁴ Less work has been done on how *The Outsider's* ideas fit alongside Wright's own contributions to philosophy, psychology, and political science. Wright performed much of this work in the essays of *White Man, Listen!*, originally a series of lectures delivered in the three years before and after *The Outsider's* publication (1950-1956). *White Man, Listen!* focuses on the Western-educated leaders of postcolonial governments, men who bear a great deal of semblance to Cross Damon.

A Postcolonial Future: *White Man, Listen!*

On the train to New York, Cross watches a white woman elbow a pot of coffee in Bob Hunter's hand. The boiling coffee pours over her arm. "Nigger, you're burning me!" the white woman yells (157). When she raises a water pitcher to smash over Bob's head, Cross jumps between them to stop her. Later Cross agrees to serve as Bob's witness against the woman, but he provides Bob a false address. Without Cross's testimony, Bob loses his job, setting in motion a course of events which lead to the West Indian's deportation, imprisonment and death. With this in mind, the question of whether Cross cares about racial justice seems impossible to resolve. The narrator states that Cross "felt keenly their [Negro] sufferings and would have battled desperately for any Negro trapped in a racial conflict" (195). And yet when Bob asked for his assistance, Cross secretly wanted to "spit in his face" (167). Cross hates Bob's trust in him because it exemplifies their difference. Bob wants to be an inside the Communist Party and organizing his fellow black porters. Cross believes that to "stick to my own people" is to "run from one master to another" (259). He felt that "being a Negro was the least important thing in his life" (385). Statements like these have led to conflicting critical interpretations of the novel's meaning: Michael F. Lynch and Joyce Ann Joyce find race to be "of relatively minor significance" to *The Outsider's* message, whereas Hayes, Keith, Maduka, and Relyea view race and racism as central to understanding Cross's dilemma (Lynch 256). The narrator claims that Cross keenly feels racial injustice and would battle desperately for any black victim, and yet Cross's willingness to fight for black people vanishes as soon as it conflicts with his own personal goals. Wright's lack of coherence on this issue makes Cross's motivations difficult to understand, but it reflects Wright's own ambivalence towards revolutionary movements in the postcolonial world.

In the six years leading up to *The Outsider's* publication, Wright had become deeply invested in amplifying the voices of postcolonial men of color, particularly through his work on

34. For Kierkegaard, see Sandra Adell's "Richard Wright's 'The Outsider' and the Kierkegaardian Concept of Dread"; Lewis A. Lawso's "Cross Damon: Kierkegaardian Man of Dread." and Claudia C. Tate's "Christian Existentialism in Richard Wright's 'The Outsider.'" For Nietzsche, see Sarah Relyea's "The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*"; Amritjit Singh's "Richard Wright's 'The Outsider': Existentialist Exemplar or Critique?"; and Kingsley Widmer's "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's 'The Outsider.'" For Heidegger, see Jeffrey Atteberry's "Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright's Critique of Marxism and Existentialism." For Dostoevsky, see Shoshana Milgram Knapp's "Recontextualizing Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Hugo, Dostoevsky, Max Eastman, and Ayn Rand"; Michael F. Lynch's "Haunted by Innocence: The Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright's 'Other Novel,' *The Outsider*"; and Maria R. Bloshteyn's "Rage and Revolt: Dostoevsky and Three African-American Writers."

the pan-African literary journal *Présence Africaine*. There Wright worked alongside and developed friendships with Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire and other African and West Indian intellectuals.³⁵ After the publication of *The Outsider*, Wright traveled to the Gold Coast to document the rise of Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party in *Black Power* (1954). He traveled to Indonesia to attend the historic meeting of postcolonial leaders at the Bandung Conference, documented in *The Color Curtain* (1955). In his dedication of *White Man, Listen!* Wright assigns these postcolonial leaders the same conflicted, "crossed" liminality found in *The Outsider's* protagonist. The dedication reads:

[TO] THE WESTERNIZED AND TRAGIC ELITE OF ASIA, AFRICA, AND THE WEST INDIES

the lonely outsiders who exist precariously
on the clifflike margins of many cultures – men who are
distrusted, misunderstood, maligned, criticized
by Left and Right, Christian and pagan –
men who carry on their frail but indefatigable shoulders
the best of two worlds – and who,
amidst confusion and stagnation,
seek desperately for a home for their hearts
a home which, if found,
could be a home for the hearts of all men. (*Black* 636)

These "tragic" men, by virtue of their talent and privilege, relocated to live as dark-skinned outsiders in the elite educational institutions of America and Europe. Their schools lionized the work of European masters and scoffed at the backwards civilizations of Asia and Africa. With enkindled hearts they returned home to reform their colonized countries, only to find themselves alienated amongst their own people, schooled in European cultural traditions that marked them again as outsiders. They found themselves as mistrusted and mistreated pawns in the Cold War struggles between First World and Second World countries.³⁶ Wright shared that same sense of liminality from his time shuttling between the literary salons of Chicago's white intelligentsia and the working-class environs of Chicago's Black Belt.

Wright used his work on *The Outsider* to begin theorizing the anxiety he believed these men would face and the guilt they would feel at reproducing the behavior of their oppressors. He originally intended *The Colored Man* to be *The Outsider's* title.³⁷ In a letter to his editor shortly after finishing the first draft of *The Outsider*, Wright stated that the novel's underlying subject was the colored man's relationship to the Western world: "I was trying to grapple with the big problem – the problem and meaning of Western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it."³⁸ Cross may find his blackness irrelevant, but Wright did not. On the

35. Senghor and Césaire formulated the theory of Négritude, which incorporated Marxist political philosophy with pan-African universalism. Wright disagreed with the theory but cherished his political and literary conversations with these men.

36. I use First World, Second World and Third World in their original sense as created by French demographer Alfred Sauvy: the imperialist, Communist and postcolonial nations of the 1950s, respectively (Fujino 338).

37. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 8020.

38. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 7943, Gayle 225.

contrary, Wright shows how a belief in the meaninglessness of race can alienate black intellectuals from their potential allies. Laying out the many contradictions in Cross's attitudes towards other black characters, Wright shows how men who fight for racial justice can slip into the role of tyrannical little gods.³⁹

Cross's motivations for murder left American critics befuddled. But within the history of *The Outsider's* scholarly reception, Western-educated African intellectuals, the sort of colored postcolonial elite described in *White Man, Listen!* have responded most positively to Cross's existentialist violence. Chidi T. Maduka, writing from Nigeria, views Cross as a "revolutionary hero" and a "hard-boiled Black who is ready to risk all in defence of human dignity" (67). Quoting from Shirley Ann Williams's definition of black heroism, Maduka interprets Cross's identity as a combination of two archetypes:

He is the rebel leader who revolts against physical bondage, and the street man, the hand man, the supreme game runner who survives through heart — courage — the power of his rap — conversation — and the bossness of his front — the effectiveness of the various guises and disguises which he wears in order to manipulate others, as well as the calmness — the icy cool — with which he faces the always changing fortunes of his life. (70)

Maduka interpretation makes Cross into both a Nat Turner-like revolutionary and an Iceberg Slim-like hustler, the sort of heroic outlaw to later proliferate blaxploitation films and hip-hop music.⁴⁰ Marc Mvé Bekale, a Gabonese critic writing from France, likewise labels Cross as heroic, an "enlightened pagan" who "asserts freedom as an absolute staple of his existence" (loc. 1620). Borrowing from Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space of Enunciation, Bekale views Cross's outsidership as a "transcendental form of hybridity," arguing that "alienation (both moral and psychological) gives Cross Damon a new lease on life." Bekale draws from postcolonial theory, but the ideas employed also correspond to the European existentialists' theories on guilt as a transformative impulse. While he does not connect *The Outsider* with *White Man, Listen!*, Bekale posits that "The evolution of Wright's heroes, from Big Boy to Cross Damon, reflects strikingly the moral and psychological dilemma of contemporary African intellectuals, most of whom go through a painful process of 'Westernization' in order to realize themselves" (loc. 1544). Wright dramatizes that painful process through scenes of violence, and then in the lengthy philosophical passages in *The Outsider's* final passages, Wright connects that violence to the history of Western imperialism and mass political movements. Cross failed to achieve his dream much like *The Outsider* failed as a novel, but the humanist message of his dying words suggests optimism for the future.

Cross Damon's grotesque and impulsive murders reflect a long sociopathy undergirding relations within modern Western civilization. Whether as subjugator or subjugated, liberal or conservative, fascist or communist, atheist or Christian, modern humans use ideological systems to justify their position and behavior. These ideologies allow men to cope with the dread and terror of life's meaninglessness in a post-God world, but they also allow exploitation, coercion and violence. The only ideology Cross subscribes to is a hatred of all existent ideologies. Cross thinks like a cynic but stops short of embracing a nihilist view. Maduka fleshes out this distinction by comparing Cross's viewpoint to Meursault in Camus' *l'Étranger* (*The Stranger*) (1942): "In other words, whereas Meursault's sense of alienation from the social institutions is fundamentally

39. Wright's characterizations of white Communists Gil and Hilton make the same point.

40. In this sense, Cross is both Ras the Destroyer and Rinehart from *Invisible Man*, both Detroit Red and Malcolm X in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965).

associated with, and indeed is the direct result of, his claim that *no form* of human institution can give meaning to life, Damon's sense of alienation is directly connected with his belief that all the *existing* human institutions are incapable of satisfying man's basic needs" (63). Cross believes that by acting on his heart's impulses, he might create a new human institution capable of attracting other men like himself. He explains this idea through a political analogy: "Was that not the secret of all the revolutionary "front" groups? You flaunted a program that would appeal to a part of the forces of the enemy; you induced a section of the enemy forces to work with you and, while your enemies were standing at your side and seeing the world as you saw it [...] they could decide that yours was as right as the side to which they belonged" (410). Here Wright explicitly connects the behavior of Cross with the postcolonial revolutionaries of his later non-fiction.

Wright uses Cross's personal narrative to stand in for the struggles of all colored men across the world. District Attorney Houston believes that Cross's murder of a Fascist and a Communist makes him "the Twentieth Century writ small" (379). *White Man, Listen!* makes an identical claim about black history: "The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small" (734). Cross's opposition to Gil and Herndon mirrors the precarious position of contemporary Third World leaders. These men needed to establish their autonomy from two larger forces, Western in origin, which were themselves in violent conflict. And they formed the head of a body politic spiritually traumatized, physically abused and materially plundered, much like the suicidal Cross in the novel's opening chapter. Wright rationalized the harsh methods of these leaders by equating them with methods of the West:

Yes, Sukarno, [Jawaharlal] Nehru, [Gamal Abdel] Nasser⁴¹ and others will necessarily use quasi-dictatorial methods to hasten the process of social evolution and to establish order in their lands—lands which were left spiritual voids by a too-long Western occupation and domination. Why pretend to be shocked at this? You would do the same if you were in their place. You have done it in the West over and over again. You do it in every war you fight, in every crisis, political or economic, you have. (*Black* 725)

Forming a new government after decades of oppression was a monumental task, the audacity of which was sure to lead to monumental failures. Wright hated the quickness to which Western men rushed to criticize their mistakes, the pleasure they took in watching these leaders struggle. Wright viewed postcolonial leaders' violence against their own populations as "tragic," but felt it hypocritical to criticize them since their actions "derive from the concepts they learned in Western schools" (*Black* 684, 686). Rather than criticize them for their failures, Wright urged Western governments to provide material support. Believing they would never do so, Wright simply asked the West to stop meddling in Africa's affairs.

Publicly, Wright never advocated for the use of revolutionary violence. As iconoclastic as his fiction may have been, by the 1950s Wright was painfully cognizant of how governing authorities could limit his movement. He declined to publicly support the Algerian Revolution, as the French government was in the practice of deporting foreigners who did so (Rowley 481). His struggles with securing travel visas, and his (correct) suspicion that he was being closely monitored by the CIA, led him to avoid commenting on the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. And he refused to do publicity for *The Outsider* in America, believing he would become the subject of a House Un-American Activities Committee investigation and be forced to remain Stateside.⁴²

41. The leaders of Indonesia, India, and Egypt, respectively, at the time of the Bandung Conference.

42. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 7795

But privately, Wright tended to defend or encourage the use of violence against oppression. In 1943, he became furious with dinner guests who criticized the Harlem riots, saying that the violence “came from a very deep place.”⁴³ In 1945, in conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru’s sister over the ongoing Indian independence movement, Wright stated emphatically that he was “not for non-violence”: “Each and every Indian ought to learn how to make gunpowder in his kitchen just like a girl learning to cook.... If you are ever free, it will be because you butcher enough Englishmen to get them off you.”⁴⁴ In 1956, visiting with a Christian missionary acquaintance from his time at the Bandung Conference, Wright sharply criticized the missionaries’ demands for non-violence: “You give Third World peoples a vision of social justice and liberation, then when they seek these ends by violence, you repudiate them, insisting this is not what you had intended.”⁴⁵ As a writer, Wright understood the messiness which accompanied turning an abstract concept into a concrete story. Judging a postcolonial nation by its first years of existence was like judging a writer based on the first draft of his novel.

Conclusion

While *The Outsider* ended up being a critical and commercial failure compared to Wright’s earlier novels, it helped him to crystallize the ideas that would populate his later non-fiction. Furthermore, the failure of the novel helped Wright to break free from the demands of the American literary marketplace. And while the novel continues to go largely unread in Wright’s home country, postcolonial intellectuals continue to identify with Cross’s journey long after his creator’s death.

In personal communication with mistresses during the two years before *The Outsider*’s publication, Wright expressed the same loneliness and despair as the novel’s protagonist. He writes to Edith Schroeder that he is “so lonely that I wish I was a dog so I could go up to the top of a high hill at night and howl at the moon.”⁴⁶ Wright describes *The Outsider* in a letter to Naomi Replansky as “a hard book [that] is full of blood, violence, betrayal, deception, murder. It is how I feel [...] I see practically nobody and so there is no news to give [...] Well, this is about all that my empty heart can say today.”⁴⁷ Even though Wright enjoyed the racial attitudes of Paris, he still felt like an outsider. He never properly learned to speak French, and he never allowed himself to publicly criticize French foreign policy. But fourteen months after the novel’s publication, Wright writes to his agent Paul Reynolds with optimism about the world’s future. Wright tells Reynolds he plans to stick with non-fiction: “I’m inclined to feel that I ought not to work right now on a novel. This does not mean that I’m giving up writing fiction, but, really, there are so many more exciting and interesting things happening now in the world that I feel sort of dodging them if I don’t say

43. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 4041.

44. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 4546.

45. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 9521.

46. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 7787.

47. Kiuchi and Hakutani loc. 8059. Roughly five years later, Wright will describe himself more optimistically as a “rootless man”: “but I’m neither psychologically distraught nor in any wise particularly perturbed because of it. Personally, I do not hanker after, and seem not to need, as many emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances as most people. I declare unabashedly that I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness” (*Black* 645).

something about them” (Fabre 407). In his travels across the African and Asian continents, Wright found his own group of outsiders, and together they formed an interwoven community of spiritually inquisitive colored men. Following Cross’s advice, Wright made a bridge from man to man.

CHAPTER 2.

“THE DARK AGES IN THE COLONIES”: FANTASY AND THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE IN MARLON JAMES’S *THE BOOK OF NIGHT WOMEN*

Slave narratives involve extended suffering and quiet desperation, punctuated by an escape North and a breath of freedom. They haunt readers and memorialize the suffering of the enslaved, but the enduring heroism of slave narratives differs markedly from the violent heroism of superheroes and soldiers in popular media. Marlon James’s neo-slave narrative novel *The Book of Night Women* (2009) combines both forms of heroism. The slaves fight back. They fight with knives and guns, fire and magic: they fight like superheroes. The Night Women, six half-sisters brought together by the plantation’s head house slave, each carry distinguishing physical marks: Lilith’s green eyes, Gorgon’s dwarfism, Hippolyta’s cut throat, Iphigenia’s burnt skin, Pallas’s fire-red hair and Callisto’s missing eye. These marks are signs of the sexual violence which birthed them and the physical violence which inspired them to rebel. These marks, like the emblems of superheroes, identify and symbolize their origin stories. And like comic books and Hollywood, *Night Women* portrays violence as an enjoyable, satisfying experience for both the perpetrator and the reader. *Night Women*’s slave girl protagonist, Lilith, relates the sensation of pleasurable violence to her mentor, Homer:

You want to know how it feel? You really want to know? Nothing in this world like killing a man. Your skin on him skin, you tearing him chest hair off. You kill just one time and you know why God save murder for himself. Wicked, wicked, wicked. And good. Good. Good. Too good. You understand me? It better than full belly or when a man fuck you good. You do it and you know why white man be master over we. Because he can grab a nigger and kill her just so. Just like that. Only white man can live with how terrible that be. (319)

Night Women represents the violence of slavery and slave resistance as fantasies to be enjoyed, but also deconstructed: the final third of the novel focuses on Lilith’s growing disillusionment with violence, her refusal to participate in the slave rebellion, and the rebellion’s ultimate failure. It sounds silly to think of Lilith as Luke Skywalker, Homer as an Obi-Wan Kenobi, and the Night Women as a Rebel Alliance, but I mean to take that idea seriously, to think of how *Night Women* fits within the genre of fantasy. What does fantasy represent, and what does the novel tell us about fantasy when we watch it crumble? How do our fantasies enthrall others?

In what follows, I will use *Night Women* to draw generic parallels between fantasy and the neo-slave narrative, given that both genres entail the spectatorship of violence. Past scholarship within Afro-pessimism will aide in this regard. I will trace the historical origins of fantasy and the neo-slave narrative, particularly as they relate to the period in which *Night Women* is set. Using James’s novel, I connect fantasy’s archetypical quest narrative with neo-slave narrative conventions through their portrayal of heroic self-realization. I link the supernatural characteristics of fantasy with the supranatural characteristics of the black diaspora. And I will narrow my incorporation of fantasy to a hybridization of two recent subgenres, romantic fantasy and grimdark fantasy. By comparing the novel’s many references to and excerpts from romantic fairy tales and Enlightenment novels, and by borrowing from previous scholarship on *Night Women* by Greg Forter, I will argue that James depicts violent resistance as a romantic fantasy to be reasoned with, deconstructed, and discarded in favor of non-violent Enlightenment self-expression. Finally, I will justify this argument by comparing the violent and non-violent resistance in *Night Women* to the

historical non-violence of the British Caribbean's enslaved population, and the violence of Jamaica's Maroon population.

Justification for this critical approach lies within James's professed love of fantasy and its place in his body of work (including his forthcoming African fantasy trilogy, *Dark Star*); in preexisting relationships between fantasy literature and neo-slave narratives; and in historical parallels between the history of slavery, the history of fantasy, and their shared relationship to the British Enlightenment. *Night Women* employs fantasy's archetypal quest narrative within the restricted distances of slave travel, as well as fantasy's archetypal protagonist: the mysterious orphan. But the novel ultimately abandons fantasy and its tendency towards violent martyrdom and civilizational healing to rechristen its protagonist and narrator, mother and daughter, as the central figures of a black Enlightenment.

(White) Fantasy and the Reality of Slavery

Lilith's formulation of "why white man be master" fits Afro-pessimist theory on the utility of master/slave violence. Afro-pessimism is a contemporary scholarly movement concerned with the inverse relationship between blackness and humanness, born out of late-twentieth-century texts on slavery's formation of the black subject, particularly Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). Patterson argued that the central function of slavery was not to produce crops and goods, even if that was "partly true of the capitalistic antebellum U.S. South" (loc. 424). He noted that "in a great many slaveholding societies masters were not interested in what their slaves produced," and "slaves produced nothing and were economically dependent on their masters" (loc. 430). Rather, Patterson found the central function of slavery was "the strong sense of honor the experience of mastership generated," which necessarily entailed "the slave's experience of its loss" (loc. 450). Similarly, Hartman identified the pleasure and purpose of slaveholding in "the fungibility of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity" (21). Frank B. Wilderson, III, editor of *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (2017), claimed that master/slave violence served the libidinal need for "a bacchanal of pleasure, not a kind of utilitarian need to extract work or obedience out of people" (24). Wilderson argued:

The repetitive nature of violence against the slave does not have the same type of utility that violence against the post-colonial subject has—in other words [...] to secure and maintain the occupation of land. It does not have the utility of violence against the working class, which would be to secure and maintain the extraction of surplus-value and the wage. We have to think more libidinally and in a more robust fashion. This is where it becomes really controversial and really troubling for a lot of people because what [Orlando] Patterson is arguing, and what people like myself and professor Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman at Columbia University have extended, is to say that what we need to do is begin to think of violence not as having essentially the kind of political or economic utility that violence in other revolutionary paradigms have. Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves. (19)

In short, Afro-pessimists argue that slavery's purpose, whether or not it provided economic benefits to the master, was to produce life-affirming sentiments: honor, joy, pleasure, fortitude, etc. The production of these sentiments for the master always, by necessity, entailed the denial of these sentiments for the enslaved.

But the pleasure of slaveholding allows for a corresponding pleasure in overturning slavery. James relates the shared pleasure of writer and character that came from Lilith's arson of a plantation house, which killed an entire family of slave owners, including their small children:

I think also, there is her absolutely getting off on it. And honestly, and again, that's another scene, I think, that was almost more me than her. That if I was surrounded by all these people who commit atrocities, I would totally burn them to death ... The anger, the fury. There's a lot of my own rage. You can't write a story about slavery and not be enraged. There were days when I was so consumed by rage I couldn't write. Part of me, bringing in this kind of "eye for an eye, we're both blind," I'm like, "I don't care, as long as you're blind, I'm fine with it." ("The Seven Killings")

Rage and pleasure are linked together through a sexual metaphor—getting off on it—much like Lilith relates murder to sexual intercourse: skin on him skin, better than when a man fuck you good. Such sociopathic forms of pleasure highlight the hypocrisy of the plantocracy. The genteel world of the plantation not only necessitated violent, antisocial behavior; it existed *for* antisocial behavior, for the dehumanization of others in order to affirm one's own humanness.

Hartman wonders if readers are getting off on it as well. She questions whether slave narratives reproduce the pleasures of slaveholding by allowing us to watch and enjoy the suffering of others. In her introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman asks readers of slave narratives, "Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance?" (3). The imbalance created by the length of these two questions suggests these two modes of reading are of unequal value, and the "or" relationship between unrepresentable terror and exhibitive terror suggests they are incongruous. Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007) responded admirably to the first question by "narrating stories which are impossible to tell" (Hartman, "Venus" 10). Two years later, James's *Night Women* responded admirably to the second question, identifying within slavery the prurient taboo, "conduct[ing] an experiment in how to write the unspeakable — even the unthinkable" (Glover). They are not of unequal value, nor are they incongruous.

We should revisit Hartman's line between witnessing and voyeurism, given that *Night Women* is part of a recent upswell in creative texts about slavery.⁴⁸ Most are mimetic depictions of Antebellum slavery, while others are speculative fiction about slave societies. All of them depict active resistance by slaves, and most include scenes of violent resistance. Some have proven to be critical and/or commercial successes, while a few, particularly the planned HBO drama *Confederate*, have provoked a great deal of controversy. *Confederate*, conceived of by *Game of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and Dan Weiss, will depict contemporary America after an alternate history where the South won the Civil War and slavery remained legal. Roxane Gay's initial response to the show was exhaustion, "simply because I have long been exhausted by slavery narratives." Slavery fan fiction, she termed it. Ta-Nehisi Coates called it "the kind of provocative thought experiment that can be engaged in when someone else's lived reality really is fantasy to

48. They appear as feature-length films (*Django Unchained* (2012), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Free State of Jones* (2016)), mimetic television series (*Underground* (2016-), *Roots* (2016)), speculative fiction television series (*Game of Thrones* (2011-), *Westworld* (2016-), *Handmaid's Tale* (2017-), *Confederate*), award-winning novels (*The Book of Night Women* (2009), *The Underground Railroad* (2016)), and video games (*Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013), *BioShock Infinite* (2013)).

you.” To Coates, a neo-slave narrative’s place within fantasy literature depends on the reader. The farther removed one is from the legacy of slavery, the more it feels fantastical.

Do the problems of voyeurism disappear when slaves commit violence against masters? Does it matter if the fantasy is written by a person of color? It depends on how such narratives are being employed, and perhaps on the positionalities of the readers who consume them, but they remain fantasies regardless. Wanda Sybil Raiford argues that narratives of black resistive violence operate as fantasy “in both the generic sense and psychological sense” through what her dissertation coins “fantastical historic”:

The *fantastical historic* as a theory explains how, through the vehicle of the nonmimetic, literature both buries and disinters the lived experience of enslavers and the enslaved. [It] is a conceptual framework that identifies black violence as the site where, in the text of the historical novel, the realm of realistic representation breaks down and the fantastical/supernatural/metaphysical erupt into the tale. (2)

Raiford’s fantastical historic corresponds to what Stephan Palmié calls *vision*, to “a record of histories rendered impossible, unreal, fictitious, and fantastic by the obliterating agency of a regime of truth” (97). I view the distinction between history-truth and fantasy-fiction as a distinctly modern, Western preoccupation, and argue that neo-slave narratives can function like fantasy even in the absence of nonmimetic elements.

When I say that neo-slave narratives bear a strange resemblance to fantasy, I do not mean to say that slave narratives are not real, that slavery was a benign institution, or that neo-slave narratives are not rooted in historical fact. What I mean, rather, is that there are multiple generic and historical parallels between fantasy and black historical literature. This is admittedly a peculiar way of understanding neo-slave narratives, but it was born out of a peculiar question: why I spent so much of my free time immersed in fantasy narratives, while I directed so much of my academic interests towards African-American literature. I believe they share key similarities, but because fantasy is so often thought of as a white literary genre (popularized by British authors, rooted in British and Nordic mythology, set in medieval societies, and populated by white protagonists), these connections have yet to be fully considered by critics of either genre.⁴⁹ So many canonical high fantasy narratives are stories of colonization, of evil outsiders swarming over a landscape, threatening to conquer and enslave its inhabitants, and so many of their characters are segmented into races with distinct, inherited traits and features (with the human race defaulted as white).⁵⁰ And since violence plays an important role in popular high fantasy and sword-and-sorcery franchises like Lord of the Rings, Conan the Barbarian, Dungeons & Dragons, Warcraft, The Elder Scrolls, and Game of Thrones, it should be helpful to use fantasy as a way of understanding

49. Particularly the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, but also C. S. Lewis and T. H. White, along with later American writers like Terry Pratchett, Terry Brooks, and George R. R. Martin. As I discuss further down, fantasy as a literary genre is relatively modern idea built around the distinction between the quantifiable, observable real and the imaginative, fanciful fantastic.

50. This is, in part, why I have chosen to stick with the term “fantasy,” rather than magical realism or Southern/Caribbean gothic, both of which could potentially describe James’s work but are limited to geographic regions. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn describe fantasy as “not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses ... There are shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal décor can differ wildly, and the lives lived in these terraced houses are discrete yet overheard” (1). In this sense, while recognizing the magical realist and gothic influences in James’s work, I am trying to bring other neighbors into the discussion.

James's *Night Women*, an exceptionally violent neo-slave narrative.⁵¹ The novel's first sentence, an explanation of how plantation violence is so quotidian that blood has "no colour," no discernable characteristic, mirrors the sort of bloodless, trauma-less violence found in popular fantasy (1).

James's work illuminates the intersections of fantasy and black historical literature, in that each of his first three novels are historical, and each utilizes fantastical elements: invocations of African gods and goddesses, ghosts/duppies, demonic possession, prophecy/revelation, obeah magic, the power of flight, and divine/demonic animal swarms. His own experience with demons, the exorcism he subjected himself to as a cure for homosexuality, has become a popular interview topic since its revelation in his *New York Times*' essay "From Jamaica to Minnesota to Myself." And his next project is a fantasy series billed as an "*African Game of Thrones*," tentatively titled the *Dark Star* trilogy and set within the continent's Bronze Age. James has "always been a big fantasy fiction geek," described George R.R. Martin as "a pretty woke dude," and plans for *Dark Star* to include a Tolkienesque commitment to world-building (Nguyen). James's past work has never been formally labeled as fantasy, and there are other, more celebrated and established black fantasists—Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor—but James's work is among the most graphically and disturbingly violent (although Delany certainly has his share of unsettling passages).

Admittedly, by connecting slave and neo-slave narratives with the genre of fantasy, I am potentially missing out an opportunity to use another genre for comparison: Romance. Romance as a literary genre flourished at roughly the same time as the events of *Night Women* (the first half of the nineteenth century), and as David Scott argues, the historiography of revolutions in the black Atlantic and beyond bear a striking resemblance to Romantic literary conventions. He asks if "the anticolonial demand for a certain kind of postcolonial future oblige its histories to produce certain kinds of pasts?" (6). Scott answers:

I [...] suggest that anticolonial stories about past, present, and future have typically been emplotted in a distinctive narrative form, one with a distinctive story-potential: that of *Romance*. They have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication; they have tended to enact a distinctive rhythm and pacing, a distinctive direction, and to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have largely depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving. I do not take this conceptual framework to be a mistake. However, in the wake of the global historico-political and cognitive shifts that have taken place in the past decade or two, I have a doubt about the continued critical salience of this narrative form and its underlying mythos. (7-8)

Perhaps in our contemporary historical moment, when the hope for a postcolonial utopia has metamorphosed into despair and the liberal dream of Johnson's Great Society has transformed into a Trump nightmare, the term fantasy better reflects our capacity for myth-making and our cynicism about the past. More importantly, the generic conventions of fantasy owe a great deal to earlier romantic conventions, so focusing on fantasy does not exclude the influences of romance. Regardless, fantasy's emphasis on civilizational conflict and racial difference makes it helpful for

51. A full list of the novel's violence would be reductively shocking (a criticism that James's work occasionally engenders), but a useful example would be its description of Derby dosing – the real-life practice invented by Jamaican planter Thomas Thistlewood and named after his first victim. After an offending slave was whipped and their wounds rubbed with pickle juice and pepper, another slave would defecate in their mouth, which was then wired shut for an extended period.

navigating narratives of racial violence. And as I will argue later in this chapter, the more recent subgenres of “romantic fantasy” and “grimdark fantasy” work exceptionally well as a template for *Night Women*.

The Historical Origins of Fantasy and the Neo-Slave Narrative

As a neo-slave narrative, *Night Women* adds to a literary genre originating in the New Left and Black Power movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Neo-slave narratives, according to Ashraf Rushdy, were part of a larger literary and scholarly attempt at “seeing history from the ‘bottom up,’” i.e. of focusing on the workers who built civilizations rather than the leaders who ruled them (4). Early examples include Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976). Christiane Hawkins argues that the neo-slave narrative, like the postmodern novel, “moves way beyond the questions of accuracy, authenticity, or truth which preoccupied the traditional slave narrative” while “moving toward reconciliation [and] the healing process” (2). Celebrated texts that stand within or on the periphery of the neo-slave narrative genre have frequently used fantastical elements to recreate the past: the time travelers of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), the titular ghost of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the smuggled African deity in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990), the afterlife sequences of Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2003), the goddess Lasirén in Nalo Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads* (2003), and the literal railroad of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016). Such texts function within black history and literature similarly to those within the fantastical canon of Arthurian legend: counternarratives that combine incomplete facts with fantastical elements to retell a people’s history and offer contemporary social criticism.⁵²

Fantasy as a literary genre⁵³ began in roughly the same period as what Philip D. Curtin called the “mature plantation complex,” and therefore the same period as the slave narrative (9). In *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* (2010), Curtin coined the term to describe the West Indian plantations of the eighteenth century, with the American “Cotton Kingdom” of the early-to-mid nineteenth century as its most successful iteration (7; 9). Gary K. Wolfe in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy* (2014) cites early literary debates over “fancy” and “the fairy way of writing” during the eighteenth century, with a rise in fantasy literature’s popularity occurring in the early-to-mid nineteenth century (7). Mary Louise Pratt famously suggested that “Romanticism originated in the contact zones of America, North Africa, and the South Seas,” and one might consider a similar origin for the Caliban-like monsters of proto-fantasy narratives (138). Fantasy likewise draws much of its setting and characters from the same earlier period that birthed

52. I am thinking particularly of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of Britain*) (1136), a proto-fantasy narrative (considered for centuries to be unvarnished truth) which both lionized the Welsh people’s military prowess against Roman and Saxon invaders while also criticizing the internecine fighting that plagued Geoffrey’s Welsh contemporaries. In modern times the Arthurian narrative maintained its celebration of British people’s history while being repurposed as contemporary social criticism against fascism (in *The Once and Future King* (1958)) and patriarchy (in *The Mists of Avalon* (1983)).

53. As Gary K. Wolfe explains, *genre* is the key word in defending this time period as the birth of fantasy: “While we can reasonably argue that the fantastic in the broadest sense had been a dominant characteristic of most world literature for centuries prior to the rise of the novel, we can also begin to discern that the fantasy *genre* may well have had its origins in these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of fancy vs. imagination, history vs. romance, the mirror vs. the lamp” (11).

plantation agriculture, the Middle Ages, when large monocultural farms along the Mediterranean Sea were awarded as rents to Crusaders, and slaves were acquired from Arabia, Palestine, Syria, and other non-Western sources (Curtin 7).

Writers and scholars have always had troubled pinning down what exactly defines fantasy (and fantasy as an identifiable genre in the literary marketplace did not occur until the twentieth century), but fantasy is more complicated than merely the presence of fantastical elements. Rather, fantasy as a literary genre birthed from the Enlightenment-era obsession with the real, the perceivable, the quantifiable; terms like fantasy, fancy, and fantastic applied to literature which strayed from those categories. According to *The Cambridge Companion of Fantasy*, works like *The Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, etc. are not considered fantasy, even though they contain fantastical elements and have inspired fantasy writers for generations, only because the societies that produced them did not construct a distinct line between fantasy and reality (James 2). In other words, the popularization of fantasy occurred at the same time as the popularization of scientific inquiry, empirical reasoning, and rational thought. Fantasy, much like the neo-slave narrative, was a reactionary movement against the gaps and limitations of historical and scientific record, a desire to reconnect with an unwritten but deeply affective past.

Nineteenth-century slave narratives were fantastical for their contemporary readers, in so far as intelligent, gifted black slave/writers living within a brutally violent form of chattel slavery were considered by most whites to be products of fanciful imagination. They were fantastical in the sense that Victorian-era cranial anthropologists like Samuel George Morton and Paul Broca were actively seeking to discount the intellectual capacity of blacks, and planters were misrepresenting slavery as a benign institution, and average Americans (including abolitionists) did not believe in the enslaved black population's potential for greatness (as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued in *Silencing the Past*, the Haitian Revolution was "unthinkable even as it happened") (73). Much like early fantasy literature used fabricated authorities and "found" journals as framing devices to verify their "private histories," these slave/writers were required to verify their narratives' authenticity through a series of introductory letters written by white authority figures. The veneer of truth readily applied to Washington Irving's Geoffrey Crayon in *The Sketch Book* (1819) required multiple corroborating sources to be placed upon Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). While these writers presented themselves as rational thinkers and enlightened souls, qualities emphasized in service to the abolitionist goals of their work, they were at best considered noteworthy exceptions to the otherwise savage and barbaric nature of blacks (criticisms that were similarly launched at gothic fiction, hence its name) (Roberts 22).

The first prerequisite for fantasy literature is a society's focus on the perceivable, the believable, the quantifiable. Theories on epistemic ignorance, particularly Charles Mills' theory of "white ignorance,"⁵⁴ suggest these terms don't always align with the real, the factual, the truthful. The second prerequisite is a society's relationship to the past, a belief that it is participating in an evolution from barbaric to civilized, primitive to sophisticated, and medieval to modern, with an emphasis on the translation of empire. Gothic literature (an early form of fantasy) was not called such because of its relationship to the art of the Visigoths or the Ostrogoths. Rather, it was a term of derision, meant to conjure images of the "savage hordes" which raided the Roman empire,

54. As formulated in "White Ignorance," Mills's term denotes how "the white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation," and thereby "becomes entrenched as an overarching, virtually unassailable framework, a conviction of exceptionalism and superiority that seems vindicated by the facts, and thenceforth, circularly, shaping perception of the facts" (19, 25).

sacked Rome, and briefly ruled Italy (like contemporary tidal metaphors used to describe unwanted immigration, *geutan*, the root word of Goth, meant “to pour” or “to flow”) (Roberts 21). From this dismissive point of view the supernatural elements in gothic literature were linked to uncivilized behavior and decaying institutions (which is how we have come to view slavery, even as its legacy lives on in the prison industrial complex). But Gothic writers were fascinated with and wrote frequently about science and technology. They were just skeptical about science’s potential. As Paul Gilroy points out, Gothic writers like Charles Brockden Brown were “incorporating and expanding beyond both the field of political thought ... and the realm of the naturalist,” i.e. beyond history and science, as a way of “underlying both their limitations” (118). Glennis Byron finds the same in Bram Stoker’s “anxieties about science’s unstable relationship with transgression,” his concern with what ancient monsters science might uncover or overlook (49). Early forms of fantasy literature thrived during the Enlightenment and Victorian eras despite the critical supremacy of classical and neoclassical art and the socioeconomic importance of science and industry, as a gateway to a mythical past. According to Wolfe, fantasy was both “inappropriate for the age of science and reason,” and yet “the Victorian age itself was one of the great periods in the development of fantasy literature” (10). Fantasy takes over where historical record fails.

Neo-slave narratives are fantastical in the sense that they represent a longing for the narratives of the millions of slaves whose stories were not published, whose personal histories were systematically excluded and institutionally erased from historical record and memory. And in the case of those few published slave narratives, it is reasonable to assume that portions of their lives were removed or deemphasized (like Jacobs’ experience with sexual violence) in order to serve the writer’s abolitionist goals, concede to white editorial demands, and/or appeal to Victorian-era standards of modesty.⁵⁵ They also represent a longing among white Americans to make sense of how their ancestors could allow the institution of slavery to persist, and as a means of reckoning with their own role as silent participants in contemporary racist institutions.

But again: what is and is not fantasy is a matter of perspective. For some readers the abuse, disenfranchisement, and institutional racism within slave and neo-slave narratives are too close to contemporary socioeconomic conditions to warrant reading them as fantasy, i.e. as satisfying a longing for a closer connection to a forgotten/erased past. Perhaps the mesmeric, otherworldly effect of reading through scenes of plantation violence is heightened among those sheltered from contemporary institutional violence (i.e. privileged white male academics like myself). But for those who experience a Burkean sublimity⁵⁶ when reading slave narratives—awe-inspiring horror that accompanies brutal depictions of medieval violence—James’s *Night Women* also allows for

55. Most of these slave narratives were also published in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when realism was popular and romantic styles and techniques were on the decline.

56. “Burkean sublimity” refers to Edmund Burke’s definition of sublimity in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Burke argued that “we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others; for let the affection be what it will in appearance, if it does not make us shun such objects, if on the contrary it induces us to approach them, if it makes us dwell upon them, in this case I conceive we must have a delight or pleasure of some species or other in contemplating objects of this kind” (118). He further argues that “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime” (131). In short, Burkean sublimity refers to intense emotions, thoughts, and pleasure that stem from moments of terror, suffering, darkness and death.

another, different sort of fantasy: the mysterious orphan of unknown parentage pitted against an overwhelming evil, the exceptional outcast who evolves into a Byronic hero.⁵⁷

The Quest Narrative and the Slave Narrative

Night Women follows the narrative of Lilith, the daughter of a deceased thirteen-year-old slave and the plantation's aging overseer, Jack Wilkins. Lilith's uncle attempted to kill Wilkins during a failed escape attempt; Wilkins raped Lilith's mother as an act of revenge. Lilith lives on the Montpelier Estate, one of the largest plantations in Jamaica, in the hut of Circe, the plantation's local prostitute and Wilkins's kept woman.⁵⁸ At fourteen, Lilith murders a Johnny-jumper (a black slave driver) to avoid being raped.⁵⁹ Homer, the head house slave, takes notice of Lilith's talent for violence. She hides Lilith in the cellar and keeps the Johnny-jumpers away. Homer introduces Lilith to the Night Women, the other slave daughters of Jack Wilkins. Under the direction of Homer, the Night Women plot to overthrow the plantation and build their own colony in the bush. But Lilith finds herself more attracted to the prospect of being Massa Humphrey's concubine. This desire puts her at odds with Miss Isobel, her white childhood friend and the eldest daughter of the neighboring Coulibre Estate. While serving dinner during a glamorous New Year's Eve ball, Lilith accidentally spills scalding hot soup on Miss Isobel's elderly chaperone. Humphrey savagely beats her, the Johnny-jumpers rape her, and Isobel convinces Humphrey to have Lilith whipped daily in public. Eventually Lilith is sent to Coulibre to be seasoned by Isobel's parents. She witnesses Isobel's father, Massa Roget, repeatedly rape Coulibre's head house slave, Dulcimina. When Isobel's mother orders Dulcimina whipped to death on the pretense of having left a gate open, Lilith becomes Coulibre's head house slave. Massa Roget forces Lilith to sexually service him in the bath, but Lilith fights back, drowning Roget in the tub. She burns down the Coulibre house to cover up her crime, killing Isobel's remaining family and their house slaves. She returns to Montpelier, where she lives in concubinage with Robert Quinn, the plantation's new Irish overseer. Lilith finds herself falling in love with Quinn, which puts her at odds with Homer's plans for violent rebellion. On the day of the rebellion, Lilith attempts to protect Quinn and Jack Wilkins, saving the latter by killing one of her own half-sisters. Quinn and the remaining Night Women die. Homer is blinded in the attack but survives to live out her life in the bush. Because of Lilith's

57. Based on the characters of Lord Byron, the Byronic hero is, in short, a moody antihero. In *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction and Television* (2009), Atara Stein writes, "The Byronic hero is a loner and an outcast; he can be arrogant, contemptuous of human beings, bad-tempered, overbearing, cold, ruthless and emotionless," but he/she "becomes transformed into an agent of revolt against the institutions that created or employed him" (2). Peter Thorslev's *The Byronic Hero: Types and Archetypes* (1962) connects the Byronic hero with the Romantic tradition of moody individualists, the "Man of Feeling" who "above all [has] almost infinite capacities for feeling: especially, of course, for the tenderness and the passion of love" (188). Stein's description stems in part from his focus on Byronic heroes in contemporary science fiction, but both scholars are describing heroes whose political and geographical movements are dictated by an awakening of, and an inability to deal with, intense, socially proscribed emotions. These emotions, for Lilith, are her rage at being abused by plantation authorities, and her romantic love for Robert Quinn.

58. For information on the real Montpelier Estate, see B. W. Higman's *Montpelier, Jamaica: A Plantation Community in Slavery and Freedom 1739-1912* (1998).

59. Dumping hot cerasee tea on his face makes Lilith "feel 'fraid and proud and wicked and she feel good. So good that she feel more 'fraid'" (15). She finishes him off with a cutlass, leaving "the black skin all chopped up with pink flesh peeking." It is the second time within the novel's first fifteen pages that a floor is awash with blood, and a clear indication that this will be a very different sort of neo-slave narrative.

actions during the rebellion, Humphrey allows her to live the rest of her life undisturbed in Jack Wilkin's cottage. She gives birth to Quinn's child, Lovey, who is revealed to be *Night Women's* narrator.

Other contemporary novels focused on a woman's decision not to participate in resistive black violence (Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Hopkinson's *The Salt Road*) cast their protagonists as healers, comforters and conscientious objectors. Lilith is rarely a source of comfort for anyone, and such comfort only exemplifies her status as sexual property: her servicing of Massa Roget during his bath, her concubinage in Robert Quinn's cottage, and her violent defense of Jack Wilkins, the man who raped her mother. *Night Women* depicts how the patriarchal plantocracy robs women of their ability to perform "womanness," i.e. to perform a gendered role in society, other than the "true darkness and true womanness that make men scream" (15). The scream is doubly referential to sex and violence; Miss Isobel hammers this theme home with her reference to the little death: "You niggerwomen are so lucky, having as you do *le petit mort* without having to marry first" (299). Violence shatters the lives of all of *Night Women's* women, even a wealthy white daughter and a head house slave. When Isobel is robbed of her role as plantation belle (after Lilith murders her entire family), she rides nightly in men's clothing to cavort in nearby Spanish Town. During the day, she isolates and medicates herself on the plantation much like Blanche from Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo* (1957)).⁶⁰ When Homer is raped into miscarriage by the Maroons, then mutilated and raped at the plantation,⁶¹ then robbed of her children, she becomes mother to the *Night Women's* rebellion, and her interest in Lilith hovers between parental and lesbian. Other than the wife of Jamaica's governor, who makes a very brief appearance during the New Year's Eve ball, every single woman in *Night Women* suffers a violent attack.

When Lilith burns Coulibre to the ground, she becomes the most feared woman on the Montpelier Estate. Her journey from orphan to hero (and ultimately, her rejection of both romantic heroism and romantic love) builds a quest narrative around finding one's womanhood in a land that denies it. A quest narrative in fantasy typically requires a long trek on foot. Of course, a slave's travels were heavily restricted. Traditionally, a long trek on foot only occurs at the end of a slave narrative, i.e. the journey North to freedom. But they also feature a series of shorter journeys—Fredrick Douglass's multiple masters in *Narrative of the Life* (1845), for example—that are likewise perilous and transformative. In *Night Women*, Lilith's relocation from Circe's cabin, to Homer's cellar, to Coulibre's kitchen, to Robert Quinn's cottage, to Spanish Town's slave market, and finally to a cottage of her own, serve as stations in a quest narrative, each with its own model of womanhood. In this quest she encounters a series of models for said womanhood, a series of female archetypes which she can choose to emulate or discard.

60. Isobel's riposte to Humphrey's paternalistic concern: "—I do not need to be comforted, Humphrey Wilson, I need to be fucked. Rutted like a common cow. Does that shock you? Are you quite horrified? Do you find me improper? Why should you? You made me this way and now I'm nothing but a leper to you. Is that what you want to hear? Do you really wish to know how base I can be, Humphrey? I'm sick of feeling like an orphan—even a whore's lot is better than mine. I would kill my family again to swap grief for pleasure!" (249).

61. Homer's unsettling description of the event: "When Wilkins run out of back she tell him to brand me front. Hear me own titty cook like a goose. Smell me own self burning. Then she have me wait on her hand and foot since then. And even that, Lilith, even that wasn't the worst. The worst was when him set six man 'pon me to fuck me so that me can breed again. Two time he do it. You know how it feel to take out this mash-up thing to feed you chile? Every time me look down, me think me chile suckin' some animal" (216-17).

The first model comes from a torn-out picture of the classic fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty,” in which the Prince leans over the sleeping Princess and “the white boy look at the white girl like she be the beautifulest, preciouseth thing” (75). Tantalus, Circe’s cabinmate, uses the picture to tell Lilith a new story each night.⁶² Tantalus lives tied around a breadfruit tree, mad, naked and castrated since being caught masturbating while watching the Mistress bathe. That a white male’s gaze can powerfully shape women’s identities becomes apparent from the picture; the danger of a black male assuming the same gaze is apparent in Tantalus’s “cut nature.” Circe provides the second model, a cruel stepmother archetype in Lilith’s fairytale beginnings. Homer claims Circe “be the only nigger me know who ever try to breed. She try real hard. Hard, hard, hard, but she barren like wilderness” (51). She drives Tantalus out of the house (he lives thereafter tied underneath a breadfruit tree, much like his Greek namesake); regularly forgets to feed Lilith (who only survives by “thief[ing] the last potato sticking in the pot”); and tires of waiting for Lilith to grow up, take a man, and get out of her house (9). Circe dies in the novel’s first act, but details about Circe’s life are fabricated and/or omitted by Homer until the novel’s third act, long after the reader has marked Circe as evil.⁶³ We discover that Circe originally occupied the same place as Lilith in the *Night Women*, and that Circe shared Lilith’s eventual distaste for the sight of blood. We learn that it was Homer, not Circe, who set the Sasabonsam (a demon from Asante folklore) upon Lilith, and we should question whether Homer lied about Circe asking the Johnny-jumpers to rape Lilith (particularly since Circe, upon learning Lilith had her first period, tells her “don’t make me see you near any of them Johnny-jumper or I goin’ kill you for sure”) (7). Circe’s life strongly resembles Lilith’s life after the slave revolt: an isolated woman, living with a child in her own cabin, whose acquiescence to the plantocracy allows her to come and go as she pleases. Circe’s station in Lilith’s quest narrative exemplifies how an unconventional black woman can become ostracized and demonized by her own people, and is perhaps the reason why Lilith teaches Lovey to read and write her mother’s story.⁶⁴ Circe exemplifies the pitfalls and limitations of being an individualist and a pariah, of taking the model of Byronic heroism too far.

Lilith’s third and fourth model of womanhood are the head house slaves of Montpelier and Coulibre, Homer and Dulcimena, respectively.⁶⁵ Homer claims that “No nigger dead on this estate unless me say so ... And no nigger live either” (18). Her ferocity and cunning echo the legendary Maroon leader Nanny, an escaped slave who confounded British soldiers with ambushes and obeah

62. As I argue later, the narrator (Lilith’s daughter Lovey) uses a lifetime of reading in the plantation’s library to flesh out the stories she hears from Lilith and Homer. We don’t quite know how much her story is “truth,” and how much is authorial creation, but we know from the first paragraph that Lilith’s name is the narrator’s invention. It seems likely that Tantalus and Circe are not “actually” named Tantalus and Circe.

63. We might read Homer’s misrepresentations of Circe in *Night Women* as James’s sly criticism of Circe in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Both are cast as evil, magical temptresses who eventually acquiesce to a white male authority.

64. Lilith’s daughter, Lovey, is ambivalent towards Lilith’s decision to teach her writing. But she suspects the decision stems from Lilith’s inherent mistrust of others, her belief that others will shape the story to fit their own ends: “But she didn’t teach me for me but for her, for when the time come to write her song she have somebody true to be her witness. Somebody who know that one cannot judge the action of a niggerwoman who only wanted to be everything and nothing. Mayhaps she ‘fraid of how the time was goin’ judge her. Mayhaps she don’t care, for she tell me everything as if me was a stranger and not blood” (414).

65. Coulibre’s name is presumably inspired by the Coulibri plantation in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Miss Isobel’s struggles with mental illness, and her jealousy towards a female slave, mimic Antoinette’s behavior in *Sargasso*. Both plantations ultimately burn to the ground at the hands of current/former slaves.

magic, and who opposed fellow Maroon leader Cudjoe's decision to sign a peace treaty with the British.⁶⁶ Homer teaches Lilith how to read, introduces Lilith to the Night Women, and tries to discourage Lilith from aspiring to be Massa Humphrey's concubine. As the novel progresses and Homer begins to lose both her mind and her control over the Night Women, she models for Lilith the danger of being consumed with the need for revenge. And Homer's counterpart at Coulibre, Dulcimena, best serves as Lilith's model for concubinage. Before leaving for Coulibre, Lilith "hear about massas and they chère amie" and hopes Humphrey will "take her up in the house and out of common negro life" (84). But Dulcimena's giddy, childlike behavior, despite having to regularly perform sexual acts on the aging, obese Massa Roget, suggests that freedom through concubinage is a fiction. Massa Roget beats Dulcimena for trivial acts and murders their two children.⁶⁷ Dulcimena's beauty, resourcefulness, quick wit and sharp tongue make her the kind of woman other women would admire under different circumstances. Her death, eighteen pages after being introduced, erases Lilith's belief in the transformative power of romantic love, the fantastical power of eros from the pages of "Sleeping Beauty."

These formative experiences, each of which ends with a sudden outburst of violence, constitute a narrative journey of realization: both a realization of self, and a realization that each path offered to her was designed for someone else's benefit. She leaves Circe's cabin after brutally murdering a Johnny-jumper. She leaves the kitchen cellar after being beaten by Massa Humphrey and raped by the Johnny-jumpers. She leaves Coulibre after burning the estate house to the ground, killing everyone inside. She leaves Quinn's cottage once the slave rebellion begins. She leaves communal slave life when the rebellion is quashed, and all her half-sisters are dead. Lilith's movements are limited and circular, but the impetus that keeps her moving, the horrific violence and the struggle for survival, make those movements feel like an epic journey. The circular conception of fantasy's quest narrative fits the refrain that appears at the beginning of five chapters in *Night Women*: "Every negro walk in a circle. Take that and make of it what you will." By "make of it what you will," there is a standoffishness, a suspicion between writer, text, and reader (cultivator, crop, and consumer) born out of the lessons of slavery.⁶⁸ But Lovey's command for us to "take that" and "make of it" also suggests adaptation, in a literary sense: that within the limiting confines of the circle, there are still infinite permutations of the journey, infinite individual stories to be told. Lilith's story of violence is also Lovey's story of reading: to some unknown degree, the details of Lilith's life are born out of the stories Lovey read in Montpelier's libraries. And the events of *Night Women* are born out of the histories, slave narratives and neo-slave narratives James read in preparation to write his novel. There are slave experiences that more closely align with the more literal "journey" in high fantasy, i.e. the long trek on foot: the slave-trader's coffle, the escape North, or the forced march from inland Africa to the Gold Coast. But Lovey and James conceive of the slave's journey in a mythical sense, as both epic in scope (the diasporic journey of an entire people, "black and long and wide like a thousand year[s]") and loaded with

66. Wilson 68; Konado loc. 3300.

67. Roget claims it was Dulcimena who murdered them, which seems just as likely. Like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, perhaps Dulcimena killed her children to keep them from living in slavery.

68. This standoffishness about storytelling also appears at the novel's beginning and end: "I goin' call her Lilith. You can call her what they call her" (3, sentences reversed on 417). We never find out what "they" call her, or who "they" are, but the sense is that they (and perhaps us) already assigned her an identity, and it was not fitting.

predetermination (118).⁶⁹ The journey is, at different moments in *Night Women*, a journey devoid of light, a journey with hills and valleys of white people's making, and a journey that squeezes itself smaller and smaller (304, 118, 218). These indications that Lilith participates in something larger than the natural, visible world, gives Lilith's journey an epic quality.⁷⁰ And the "dialogic tension" between epic themes and novelistic form, according to fantasist Eduardo Lima, is precisely what demarcates the genre of fantasy (7).

Transatlantic Violence and Grimdark Fantasy

The reader knows from the first page that Lilith is marked as a special child. She is the lone baby of 1785. Lilith's mother speaks a curse upon Lilith with her dying breath. The midwives "regard her with fear and trembling" because Lilith has "the greenest eyes that anybody ever done see [...] green eyes that light up the room, but not like sunlight" (1). The women want to discard Lilith in the bush. Fantasist Eduardo Lima refers to these details as "obscure prophecy," an early symbol whose meaning cannot be understood until later events (13).⁷¹ These eyes mark her both as the product of rape, and as the embodiment of envy, as a character who always desires what the white world does not allow her to partake in: freedom, love and violence. "Coromantee blood that never know slavery," Lovey's narration informs us, "mix with white blood that always know freedom and race through Lilith body like brush fire" (48). By Lovey's logic, Lilith's genealogy predetermines her character: as a descendant of two kingdoms (British and Asante) known for their military prowess, Lilith cannot be tamed. But Lilith remarkably chooses slavery. She does not participate in the Night Women's rebellion, although she does not inform on them, either. Her decision is a radical choice. As historian Daniel Rasmussen explains, "All [slaves] knew that the clearest path to freedom was not to join a revolution but to betray one; the planters had made that much clear" (102). Had Lilith chosen to inform on the Night Women, she presumably could have earned her freedom. But Lilith rejects her lineal connection to the civilizations which produced her, and she rejects the fantasy hero's role as civilization's savior.

Lilith is the product of two proud civilizations: she is half-British, like all her sisters in the Night Women, and she is half-Coromantee, a misnomer indicating those Africans trafficked into slavery through the port of Koromantine. In *Night Women*, Coromantee is synonymous with descendants of the Asante Kingdom, often known as Ashanti or Fante. The Asante were a confederation of Akan tribes that controlled the resources of the Gold Coast and raided inland

69. The narrator's conception of the circle helps to explain how individual journeys link together into an entire people's journey: "But sometimes when a negro die and another negro take him place, even if that negro not be blood, they still fall in step with the same circle. The same circle of living that no nigger can choose and dying that come at any time. Perhaps nigger take things as they be for what used to be will always be what is" (411).

70. The Night Women's repeated references to other women-led rebellions organized in concert with their own ("—Homer, you worried 'bout Worthy Park? Jackson Lands worried 'bout we"), but beyond our readerly purview, helps emphasize the epic nature of Lilith's narrative (166).

71. Lima uses Jon Snow's discovery of the dead direwolf in *A Game of Thrones* as an example of obscure prophecy. Like Lilith, Snow is a bastard orphan of dual parentage (Targaryen and Stark) whose mother died in childbirth. Like Lilith, Snow is asked to fight in someone else's rebellion (Stannis Baratheon). And like Lilith, Jon Snow's quest narrative is largely a journey of self-discovery, not a physical journey.

Akan villages.⁷² They were known for “their leadership skills in war and political organization” (Konadu loc. 133). The Asante celebrated the “paradigmatic ideal of manhood on the battlefield” and prized the “epitome of manhood status forged in war” (McCaskie 45).⁷³ These wars and raids provided the Asante with a steady population of slaves, both to keep and to sell to Europeans (Patterson loc. 1554). Their reputation for organizing West Indian slave rebellions, due to their military training and their shared cultural and linguistic ties, were infamous among Jamaican planters.⁷⁴ The West Indian practice of obeah is rooted in the spiritual traditions of the Akan and Asante, and rebel leaders often started as obeah practitioners in their communities (Konadu loc. 2933). Aphra Behn’s fantastical 1688 novel *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave*, a “true history” of a fictional Coromantee prince-turned-slave, illuminates the sort of supernatural power Europeans ascribed to Coromantee/Asante rebels. After the failure of his slave rebellion and his eventual capture, Oroonoko prefers death over being whipped, and with his knife “ripped up his own belly, and took his bowels and pulled ‘em out, with what strength he could” (loc. 1184). He can still stand and talk despite these self-inflicted injuries, and maintains his stoic posture through a litany of dismemberments:

He had learned to take tobacco; and when he was assured he should die, he desired they would give him a pipe in his mouth, ready lighted; which they did. And the executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them into the fire; after that, with an ill-favored knife, they cut off his ears and his nose and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him; then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe; but at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost, without a groan or a reproach. (loc. 1215-19)

The Coromantee identity is a translation of the Asante empire and an antecedent to Jamaica’s Maroon population, which still exists today (although the ethnic identities of the Maroons evolved alongside that of Jamaica’s slave population and were not strictly Asante or Akan) (Konadu loc. 3170). These Maroons were descendants of escaped slaves who organized villages in the country’s mountain regions; Nanny Town in east Jamaica, and Trelawny Town and Accompong in west Jamaica, were among the largest of these settlements (Wilson 47). Like the Asante, the Maroons’ ability to defeat larger and better-armed British forces through guerilla warfare was legendary. And like the Asante, the Maroons engaged in a form of slave trading: the terms of their 1739 peace treaty with Jamaica’s colonial government awarded them two dollars for the return of an escaped slave and required them to assist colonial militias in the event of a slave rebellion. The historical Montpelier Estate, built near a Maroon settlement in the same year as the peace treaty, required the Maroons’ complicity in order to thrive (Hall 478). In the decades leading up to the events of

72. The Asante kingdom was formed out of a largescale conflict between the Denkyira and the Akan in the late seventeenth century, and Asante is thought to literally mean “because of war” (Cleveland 213).

73. Historian Emma Kathryn Cleveland argues that the patriarchal militarism of the Asante was largely a reaction to the transatlantic slave trade. Before then, women held esteemed political and economic roles, including that of Queen Mother, in precontact Akan communities (Cleveland 211-212). Homer references the Queen Mother’s role when she tells Lilith, “You did know say is the woman pick the king in the Africa? The king be always the oldest sister’s boy pickaninny. A woman who give birth to Ashanti man bigger than the man himself” (337).\

74. Planter-historian Edward Long, in *The History of Jamaica* (1776), warned that “Coromantee negroes [held] a chimerical ambition to possess themselves of the sovereignty of the island, to extirpate the whites, and to destroy all the blacks who should refuse to submit to their usurpation. Their plan was to set up an African term of government, and to make the negroes of all other nations (not born Coromantees or their descendants) their tributary slaves and vassals” (Leigh 2).

James's novel, the Maroons were as hated amongst the slave population as their British enslavers, and the Maroons thought of slaves as an inferior class of people (Geggus 284). While the Maroons' struggles to resist slavery have become an epic chapter in Jamaica's cultural history, their independence is partially a myth. The Maroons survived by explicitly working for slave masters, as slave catchers, in order to maintain their freedom. The Maroons' preyed on slaves just like the Johnny-jumpers who stalk the Montpelier plantation, exchanging the suffering of others for their own marginal freedoms.

Lilith's rejection of British freedom and Asante militancy marks *Night Women* as a "grimdark" fantasy, a dark subversion of traditional heroic tropes. Grimdark fantasy traffics in the traditional structure and themes of the genre, a fictionalized history in which medieval violence and magical powers serve heroes and villains in their fight over the fate of a civilization. But grimdark fantasy criticizes the genre's limitations, particularly its reductionist, good vs. evil worldview.⁷⁵ Fantasist Helen Young defines grimdark as "a reaction against what is seen as a romanticized, even bowdlerized, version of the Middle Ages inspired in fantasy by the imitation of Tolkien's work" (loc. 157). As a grimdark fantasy, *Night Women* tears down the chivalric codes of British mythology and the militaristic masculinity of the Asante kingdom, in part because neither tradition extends the same freedoms and power to women as they do to men. And in a broader sense, *Night Women* tears down anticolonial historiography and its tendency towards romantic, male-dominated narratives of revolution. The subgenre of "romantic fantasy," as conceived by John Snead, serves as another helpful parallel, as it "features stories of strong, competent female characters" which "celebrate tolerance and diversity" and "focus on *relationships*, social, political, and romantic." Romantic fantasy was popularized in the 1980s (during James's adolescence) as a response to the patriarchal narratives which predominated fantasy. Archetypical romantic fantasy plots include:

- A teenager, often from an overly strict or abusive family (or a family or village slain by bandits or monsters) runs away and discovers magical or psychic powers and a glorious destiny.
- A person in transition—often someone who has recently lost a loved one or left home in search of a new life—overthrows an usurper or saves their kingdom from invasion.
- In a time of troubles, a group of adolescents or adults are drawn together by destiny to form a group or organization larger than the sum of its parts. Generally, these people are outcasts or orphans, on the fringes of society. (Snead)

The narratives of Lilith, Homer, and the Night Women, respectively, provide grimdark revisions to the romantic fantasy plot structure. Lilith's sociopathic father, dead mother, and whore caretaker are brutal versions of the abusive/slain family archetype. Homer's failed escape, murdered children and rebellious plot are brutal versions of the person-in-transition archetype. The Night Women, a cabal of burnt and disfigured half-sisters of the plantation's overseer, are brutal versions of the group-of-orphans archetype. *Night Women* is a grimdark romantic fantasy, a dark criticism of romantic conventions.

75. George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series would be a popular example of grimdark.

Romantic Fantasy Versus Enlightenment Reason

Lilith comes to view both patriarchal civilizations as bankrupt. The British model of freedom has strayed so far from its mythological Boudicean⁷⁶ roots that “when [white men] come to the West Indies, the cocky be the first thing they set free” (43). The Coromantee model of freedom hinges on their role as slave-catchers who either rape escaped women before returning them or keep them for breeding. Both freedoms encourage the sexual exploitation of women. Homer’s romantic all-female rebellion is equally fraught with problems, due to her lack of long-term planning and her disinterest in the survival of its participants (nearly everyone involved will die, in addition to many innocent bystanders). All three groups relied on medieval violence as a brutal solution to societal conflict. In other words, the West Indian plantocracy was stuck in the Dark Ages. In “A Good Head and a Better Whip,” Greg Forter argues that *Night Women* complicates “the overly rapid acceptance in postcolonial circles of a Foucauldian paradigm for understanding plantation slavery” (521-22). Forter sees *Night Women*’s violence as evidence that “disciplinary regimens of Enlightenment reason” still required “the *feudal* order’s dissemination of terror through the ‘spectacle of the scaffold’ – through public displays of bodily mutilation that indexed the master’s absolute authority while subduing through terror those forced to witness it” (522). The white characters in *Night Women* are relatively aware of the Enlightenment’s limited value on West Indian slave plantations. In their encounter with obeah, Massa Humphrey laments “that the age of reason should visit everywhere but the goddamn colonies,” and Isobel warns Robert Quinn that it “be the Dark Ages in the colonies, and you’d do well to think as such!” (108, 111). Quinn’s eventual distaste at the sight of blood, and his belief in a shared complaint between Irish and African against the English, lead Forter to argue that Quinn embodies “the utopian promise of an alternative kind of Enlightenment futurity” (521). In other words, Quinn recognizes the present failure of Enlightenment reason to create a humane society in the West Indies, but he imagines a potential future in which African and Irish might align themselves politically. As an extension of Forter’s argument, consider how Lilith better embodies this alternative Enlightenment futurity. Quinn and Lilith’s shared romantic desire brings them together, yet Lilith reasons their love is impossible, and Lilith reasons (at roughly the same point in the novel) that Homer’s rebellion is a mistake. Lilith, in other words, embodies the Enlightenment tendency towards dispassionate critique. Quinn will leave the novel like a chivalric knight, fighting and dying on horseback in defense of his liege-lord’s property.⁷⁷ Lilith, through her survival and the birth of Lovey, brings that African-Irish partnership into a real, physical form.

Lilith and Quinn learn about love through the books they read, and Lovey shapes their narrative through the books she reads. Here I echo Forter’s claim that *Night Women* “contends that love is the effect of an exclusionary Enlightenment discourse – quite precisely, of books” (524-25). But the books in *Night Women* that champion love are romantic fairy tales, the pre-Enlightenment texts “Sleeping Beauty” and *The Faerie Queene* (1590). In Henry Fielding’s

76. Boudicean refers to Boudica, a British warrior-queen from mid-first century AD and a popular subject in British folklore. In what is known as the Boudican Rebellion, she led an army of 200,000 followers against the occupying Romans colonizers, killing 70,000 of them and sacking three cities (Aldhouse-Green 2).

77. Quinn’s fateful decision at the novel’s end mirrors old massa Patrick Wilson’s decision at the novel’s beginning. Wilson “get all caught up in rule Britannia!” and leaves Jamaica to fight in the Great Siege of Gibraltar; he returns mentally broken and spends his life in quixotic battle against imagined foes, “open[ing] war ‘pon de rose bush” and jousting with trees (33, 22).

Enlightenment-era novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742), selections from which appear throughout *Night Women* as part of Lilith's reading practice, the chaste fidelity of the lowly titular servant is a rare commodity in an otherwise bankrupt society filled with (to use Fielding's own language) wicked, forward, saucy sluts, the greatest of which, Lady Booby, is a noblewoman. The exclusionary discourse on love Lilith encounters does not stem from the Enlightenment. If anything, the antiromantic *Joseph Andrews* gives Lilith a suitable model for her own world, where servants are subject to the sexual whims of their superiors and false accusations are laid against servants who will not submit. Henry Fielding was no friend to the downtrodden; he spent much of his life writing polemics in favor of harsher anti-vagrancy laws and increased surveillance of the poor.⁷⁸ But his primary foe, according to romanticist Scott MacKenzie, was the "dereliction of just and charitable stewardship by vain, idle, and voluptuous members of the gentry and aristocracy," the sort of character traits widely attributed to Jamaica's planter class and recognizable in planter characters like Miss Isobel and the Rogets (611). Fielding linked this behavior to the generic conventions of literary romance and viewed the romantic spirit as an affectation practiced by social climbers.⁷⁹ Homer likewise embodies the romantic spirit Fielding loathed in her hopes to climb out of slavery and her fatal stewardship of the Night Women. Like the Rogets, Homer's romantic plot requires brutal violence against others. In short, I agree with Forter that love is the effect of an exclusionary discourse, but that discourse is the product of romance, not the Enlightenment.

Furthermore, I would modify Forter's claim that the Night Women's rebellion is built on "black Enlightenment principles" (537). Forter makes a reasonable claim, given that the Haitian Revolution which Homer references (and which sits in the reader's mind as *Night Women* unfolds) was indeed fulfilled through a black Enlightenment. Toussaint L'Ouverture's ability to navigate France's diplomatic entreaties, align his revolution with the ideals of the French Revolution, and seek compromise and understanding with an oftentimes duplicitous foe exemplifies the best traits of Enlightenment rationalism. But L'Ouverture's revolution is not Homer's rebellion, and Forter misses the way *Night Women* critiques Homer's motivations and leadership (and then justifies those critiques through plotting). Lilith repeatedly counsels Homer to "put an end to" the Night Women's rebellion, since "all [Homer] care 'bout is dead pickney" (362).⁸⁰ Callisto, the Night Woman Lilith most identifies with, offers a similar critique of Homer's reasoning: "Niggers on five estate know you mind dead. And you don't have no use. Better for we if you go live with you dead pickney now. Cho! If people didn't still 'fraid o' you me'd arrange that meself" (370). These criticisms accompany Homer's transition from imposing leader to an addled, aging Lamia/Llorona figure. She whimpers to herself and coos to her dead children. As the rebellion unfolds and the plantation burns, she foregoes freedom to torture Mistress Wilson (31). Homer's sudden disinvestment from the Haitian Enlightenment model in order to seek revenge suggests it was always a romantic fantasy, a story she created to coerce the Night Women's assistance.

In keeping with its antiromantic depiction of colonial revolution, *Night Women* depicts romantic love as an impermanent and self-destructive force. Quinn's behavior exemplifies this

78. MacKenzie 609.

79. MacKenzie 608.

80. In a lengthy confrontation, Lilith repeatedly attempts to reason with Homer: "—You don't give damn 'bout no freedom or no black man land, you just want somebody to bleed for you pickney [...] All of them [women] want to get free so bad them don't even see that you not making no sense. Not one thing 'bout this rebellion make sense [...] Them [pickney] dead, Homer. Too late now to try be a mother" (339-41)

flaw. In comparison to *Night Women's* other, more horrific depictions of plantation violence, readers may downplay or overlook Quinn's abusive treatment of Lilith. Such a comparison leads Forter to claim that "the novel imagines love on the model of a transgressive, potentially revolutionary force" (525). But love's transgressive force is short-lived. Homer learns this when the only man she loved, the man she escaped Montpelier with, abandons her to be raped and returned to slavery by the Maroons. Lilith and Quinn's love only performs a doomed reenactment of the chivalric conventions of Arthurian romance (525). James suggests this interpretation by following *The Faerie Queene's* first appearance with an outburst of violence by Quinn:

—Who's there? he say to her.—Your lover? Is it some goddamned nigger? Running away, are ye now? Or perhaps you seek to make a cuckold out of me? I should have left ye for McClusky, that's what I should've done!

Lilith feel him squeezing her neck. This not be the man who call her lovey and was talking to her from *The Faerie Queene*. (283-4)

Quinn's insecurity regularly causes him to lash out against Lilith, and his violence directly parallels the violence in Spenser's story. Based on Lilith's reaction to the line "*A floud of poison horrible and blacke*," we know Quinn has been reading to Lilith from Book One, and Quinn will then reenact Book One's events within their relationship.⁸¹ Quinn's subsequent awakening to imagined cuckoldry mirrors Redcrosse's awakening to Una's imagined cuckoldry in Canto II, and Quinn's choking of Lilith mirrors Redcrosse's choking of the half-lady Errour in Canto I. Unfortunately for Lilith, Quinn is precisely the sort of man who believes "everything that mankind ever needed to say Spenser say in *The Faerie Queene*" (283). When Quinn later commands Lilith to be free (only within the heterotopic space of the bedroom), he is asking her to *perform* as a free woman, because he can only perform as Redcrosse if she can perform as Una. But as Spenser's description shows, Lilith is nothing like Una:

A louley Ladie rode [Redcrosse] faire beside
Vpon a lowly Asse more white then snow,
Yet she much whiter [...]
And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad.
So pure and innocent, as that same lambe,
She was in life and euery vertuous lore,
And by descent from Royall lynage came
Of ancient Kings and Queenes, that had of yore
Their scepters stretcht from East to Westerne shore,
And all the world in their subiection held;
Till that infernall feend with foule vprore
Forwasted all their land, and them expeld:

Whom to auenge, she had this Knight from far co[m]peld. (loc. 40)

Lilith is not white, pure and innocent, nor is she descended from royalty. Instead, Lilith identifies with the story of Errour: she is a monstrous woman who made a flood of poison horrible and black

81. Book One of *The Faerie Queene* entails the journey of the chivalric knight Redcrosse and his noble lady, Una. Redcrosse fights the female dragon Errour, becomes bewitched by the wizard Archimago, and is eventually imprisoned by the deceitful Duessa. These conflicts serve as an allegory for Britain's relationship to the Catholic church, but the Irish Quinn seems to overlook (or perhaps internalizes) the book's anti-Catholicism.

expel from every orifice of Andromeda's body.⁸² She can never be Una. And as Homer reminds her, "Robert Quinn still out there beating and killing niggers. He go to Spanish Town to buy two fresh nigger only yesterday" (296).⁸³ Medieval romance provides the template for Robert Quinn's love, but it also produces the violence he unleashes on the Montpelier estate.

Historicizing *Night Women*

Heterodox representations of Jamaican mythologies, representations which depart from traditions and standards, have always been a feature of James's work. Johnny Temple, the publisher of James's first novel, *John Crow's Devil* (2005), recalled a tense reading at the Jamaican consulate: "Everybody was so uncomfortable. There were people gasping, everyone was wiggling in their chairs, a lot of sucking of teeth – that kind of writing is too dark for some people" ("The Seven Killings"). A reading of *Night Women* at Jamaica's Calabash Festival went even worse; James described it as "something that ran afoul of all the goodly mothers of Jamaica," and Calabash founder Kwame Dawes confirmed there was tension between author and audience (Cooke).⁸⁴ What makes *Night Women* heterodox, particularly within Jamaica's cultural memory, are its descriptions of Maroon cruelty and its unwillingness to allow Lilith and Homer to become romantic heroes. It critiques violent anticolonial resistance as much as it critiques violent colonial oppression, forcing the reader to question whether violence is an ethical and efficacious means of change.

To understand what answer James offers through the failure of Homer's rebellion, it helps to historicize the fictional rebellion's place within real British Caribbean slave rebellions. The 1801 rebellion occurred between what historian Gelien Matthews refers to as the pre-Emancipation and Emancipation eras of British Caribbean slave revolts: those before the British abolitionist movement, and those during the British abolitionist movement. Matthews views these two eras as having two distinct attitudes towards rebellion:

While the pre-nineteenth-century generation of slave rebels aimed at overthrowing their masters, taking over the plantations, or living as outlaws in hardy and inaccessible terrain, the spirit that motivated the new generation was quite different and more dangerous [...] Like their forebears, they wanted to be free. Unlike their forebears, however, they were not struggling merely to be refugees from the law. The rebels of the "Emancipation Revolts" fought for what they considered to be rightfully theirs by law. They aspired to the status of

82. In hopes of getting closer to Massa Humphrey, Lilith desires Andromeda's place amongst the waitstaff of the Montpelier Estate New Year's Eve ball. She pays an obeah-woman to poison Andromeda, and in taking her place becomes the novel's prefatory quote: "I / am the / woman they give / dead women's / clothes to" (2).

83. Homer also reveals to Lilith a disturbing secret from Massa Humphrey's diary: Quinn murdered a woman in Venice to protect Massa Humphrey's good name.

84. I asked Dawes about the encounter years later, during a 2013 Q&A session: "I tried to get him off the stage, that's what I tried to do, because you know Marlon goes on stage, and he knows this is Jamaica, and it's pure bad word [...] and it's cussing and bad word and slackness and all kinds of things he's reading, and so a woman says, 'Mr. James, there's women and children in the audience!' [...] [James said] 'oh well, you know it was an adult event here, you should just come and take it anyway,' and Marlon just proceeds to cuss and then he tries to change it and then he gets tired of trying and he just keeps going. So it was decidedly scandalous, but it was a hot session, so at the end of the day it worked out" ("Poet Kwame Dawes").

freemen with the right to be fairly compensated for their labor on the plantations or to have two or three days of leisure to use as they saw fit. (43-44)

Such rebels influenced and were influenced by the rhetoric of the British abolitionist movement developing overseas. This “new and less violent phase of active resistance,” much like contemporary labor unrest in Britain, combined civil disobedience, destruction or confiscation of property, and vocal demands for legislative action (75). Each major slave revolt of this second phase dispelled the nightmarish tales of proslavery writers, which Hilary Beckles refers to as the “racist notions of angry and savage blacks in vengeful and mindless lust for blood and white women” (871). There was extensive arson and looting in the 1816 Barbados revolt, but no intentional killing of white slave owners.⁸⁵ Local Reverend John Smith, testifying as a witness to the 1823 Demerara revolt, remarked that it “has been unlike every other I have ever heard of or read of. In former revolts in this colony [...] blood and massacre were the prominent features. In this a mildness and forbearance, worthy of the faith they professed” (*British* 95).⁸⁶ Smith wrote that Demerara’s slaves “offered no personal violence to any one; neither did they set fire to a single building; nor rob any house [...] except of arms and ammunition” (“Unfinished Letter”). Missionary William Knibb, after interviewing participants of Jamaica’s 1831 Baptist Rebellion, conveyed to the Anti-Slavery Society that “it was not their intention at first to destroy property or to injure the whites, but to insist on having wages at the rate of 2s. 6d. currency or 20d. a day, the present rate of wages” (Society 107).⁸⁷ These slaves’ willingness to forego revenge against their masters and overseers and instead seek compromise with the colonial government asserted their humanity, their ability to assume the rights and responsibilities of free men. It also provided a stark contrast to the cruelty of slaveowners, who in response to the uprisings proceeded to torture, murder, dismember, and publicly display both participants in the rebellions and innocent slaves falsely accused. As Matthews effectively argues, this new method of rebellion changed the course of British abolitionism: antislavery advocates shifted from publicly denouncing slave rebellions to making them the central focus of their arguments, just as slaves shifted from violent to non-violent means of rebellion. This trend toward non-violence was due in part to the creolization of the British Caribbean’s slave population, i.e. to the development of a new Afro-Caribbean people. In Cuba, which continued to import large numbers of Africans into their labor force, slave revolts became *more* violent over the course of the nineteenth century (Barcia 11). African-born slaves brought their military training and cultural/linguistic ties to bear upon the struggle, choosing to fight for independence from British rule entirely, whereas creole slaves chose to represent themselves as

85. The 1816 Barbados revolt took place within four parishes on the southeastern side of the island. Both male and female slaves participated, along with aide from black freemen. Slavery advocates blamed the revolt on abolitionists, claiming that their activism had led slaves to believe emancipation was imminent. The London Anti-Slavery Society reported: “All we know is that the alleged insurgents made no attack; they were the party attacked. No white man appears to have been killed or even wounded by the Blacks, while from one to two thousand are said to have been hunted down, and put to death, without resistance” (Matthews 18, 105).

86. It was Quamina, a deacon in John Smith’s church, who led the rebellion in Demerara (what is now northern Guyana). Despite the non-violent nature of the rebellion, roughly 250 slaves were executed (Matthews 120). Quamina’s corpse “was dragged to the front of Success Estate, and there, between two cabbage trees still standing, he was gibbeted as a rebel, the corpse bound together with chains, and allowed to swing in the breeze for many months after, to the terror and disgust of every passer-by” (Matthews 114).

87. The Baptist Rebellion was “the greatest of all rebellions in the British West Indies,” with 300,000 slaves participating across western Jamaica. The subsequent violence claimed the lives of a dozen whites and over 500 enslaved blacks (Matthews 21).

mistreated citizens of colonial Jamaica, capable of engaging in the same sort of Enlightenment reason and debate as their oppressors.

The aging, African-born Homer and the young, creole narrator Lovey represent two distant generations of active resistance: Homer chooses to fight, Lovey chooses to write. Lilith occupies a semi-tragic midway point between Homer and Lovey, between pre-Emancipation and Emancipation resistance: she is “not goin’ shed the blood of no more white man,” but that decision excludes her from ongoing means of active resistance (334). The Night Women’s rebellion is the last iteration of Matthews’s pre-Emancipation model for slave rebellion, which the cruelty of the Maroons all but foreclosed. Lilith’s turn away from violent rebellion allows her to be the mother of *Night Women*’s true black Enlightenment, which only becomes clear once Lovey is revealed to be the narrator. Lilith’s choice not to fight, and therefore to survive, allows for the birth of Lovey. Lovey births a written retort to the exclusionary discourse of premodern literature.

In *Night Women*’s final pages, where we discover Lovey is the narrator, the lines between history and fantasy begin to disintegrate. In the novel’s last sentence, Lovey repeats what she told us in her opening paragraph: “Lilith” is not Lilith’s real name but what Lovey “goin’ call her” (3, 416). Lovey’s renaming of Lilith connects her mother’s story to a literary figure that spans thousands of years, a “dark woman in the corner” who defied patriarchal conventions (296). The Lilith figure has roots in the Babylonian night demoness Lilitu (Summers 5). A similar archetype, the “child-stealing witch,” appears in early Greek and Arabic literature (Gaster 147). In Jewish mythology, the name Lilith belongs to two characters sometimes believed to be the same person: the first wife of Adam, and a demoness who seduces men and eats children. Howard Schwartz’s collection of Lilith myths in *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (2007) show a striking resemblance between Lovey’s Lilith and the Jewish Lilith. They both refuse to submit to a man’s sexual authority, and they both travel to a cave to consort with demons (Schwartz 215-217). They both live in a cellar, and they both seduce men working above them (Schwartz 219-220). They both murder a mother and her newborn infant (Schwartz 224). And they both birth mixed-raced progeny destined to be reviled:

That is why it is written that a man may not sleep alone in a house, for Lilith will attempt to seduce him. She will slip in if the window is open a crack, slip beneath the door and beneath the sheets. Her long hair is jet black. Many a man has felt it hanging in his face as he lay asleep, dreaming lustful dreams. After she steals his seed, Lilith gives birth to mutant demons, half human and half demon, who are destined to be outcasts. Humans will hate them, because they are half demon, and demons will hate them because they are half human. (Schwartz 217-218, translated from the *Zohar* 1:14a-b).

Here Lilith sounds remarkably like the black jezebel, and her children sound remarkably like the tragic mulatto. They live as outcasts, rejected by both races, because they blur the distinct line between two segregated societies. These early stories of Lilith and her progeny mythologize the abject female, and their literary presence bleeds into the modern world. According to David Melville Wingrove, the ancient figure of Lilith evolved into “the bloodsucking Romantic *femme fatale*, a figure that haunted Goethe, Coleridge, Tieck, Gautier, Keats, Poe, Baudelaire, Le Fanu, Stevenson, and Stoker (to name only a few)” (175). The Lilith figure served the fantasies of male writers in the Romantic and Victorian eras as the embodiment of erotic horror, a supernatural woman both desirable and deadly.

The name “Lilith,” like every other slave name, allows Lovey to place her narrative in dialogue with earlier, established literary traditions. Lovey chooses “Homer” for “the blind niggerwoman in the bush [who] tell me everything,” the sightless historian of the Night Women’s

epic battle (416). Like his mythical Greek counterpart, “Tantalus” lives below the branches of a fruit tree, near the hut of “Circe,” a Greek temptress and Renaissance-era prostitute. Lovey borrows the name of Atlas—the slave mistakenly blamed for Homer’s rebellion—from “somebody me read about in Thomas Bulfinch book” (416). This minor detail proves intriguing. The book is Bulfinch’s *The Age of Fable, or Stories of Gods and Heroes* (1855), which was republished in an immensely popular three-volume series *Bulfinch’s Mythologies* (1881). *Mythologies* also included *The Age of Chivalry, or Legends of King Arthur* (1858) and *Legends of Charlemagne, or Romance of the Middle Ages* (1863). While Bulfinch’s source material matches up with my larger argument about premodern literature and proto-fantasy narratives, *Mythologies* does not fit the timeframe of the novel. Perhaps James’s literary chronology of Lovey’s source material contains a small error. But if taken seriously, and because we know Lovey began writing her mother’s story in 1819, the Bulfinch reference means Lovey continued writing that story over four decades, maybe longer. Lovey’s cited reading habits must have seeped into and fleshed out the details either forgotten or omitted from the oral narratives of Homer and Lilith. Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and John Donne’s erotic poetry found their way into Lilith and Quinn’s difficult relationship. The condescending racism of Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774) germinated into the mouth of Massa Roget and Miss Isobel. Given Wingrove’s assertion that “Lilith was at the peak of her popularity in the literature and painting of the late Victorian era,” perhaps the autobiographical impulses of a teenage Lovey evolved over time into a metatextual critique of an elderly Lovey’s European contemporaries (177). In this sense, *Night Women* is not just about the violence of Jamaica’s colonial plantations, but about the violence in Jamaica’s colonial libraries. The literary traditions of Europe loomed over the island’s cultural and educational institutions. The fantasies of these white male writers were inflated into verifiable truths about human nature, particularly as it applied to dark and mysterious women.

Conclusion

Some scholars have sharply criticized *Night Women*’s violence. Borrowing from Saidiya Hartman, these scholars argue that James’s neo-slave narrative reinscribes violence upon the enslaved female body in order to satisfy the reader’s prurient desires. Nadia Ellis finds that Lilith’s repeated rapes and beatings produce “a fraught combination of readerly voyeurism, complicity, and numbness.” Markus Nehl argues that “James’s novel exposes the enslaved to a further act of violence by presenting the (female) slave’s experience of humiliation and sexual exploitation in an explicit, even pornographic, way” (162). Nehl equates the novel’s violence with pornography. He criticizes reviewers for ignoring these problems. Eventually he launches a personal attack: “By inventing a female protagonist, James tries to capitalize on the commercial success of female-authored neo-slave narratives” (190). Such an accusation ignores that James did not publicly come out as gay until six years after the novel’s publication, and that Lilith’s transgressive relationship with Quinn allowed James to write about queer intimacy without the fear of being outed. These criticisms exemplify the rhetorical power that literary violence provides. It can implicate readers in the suffering of fictional characters and provoke attacks against an author’s intentions.

But if we are complicit in the violence against Lilith and Homer, then we are also complicit in the violence committed by Lilith and Homer. We participate in a criminal conspiracy against the institution of slavery. We play out the fantasy of being a vigilante. We enjoy watching the

plantations burn. One might assume that the moralism of Hartman, Ellis and Nehl is incongruous with such pleasurable spectatorship. But they work in tandem: when others demand we do not watch, we cannot help but look.

CHAPTER 3.

THE AUTHORITY OF IGNORANCE: SCIENTISM AND Gnosticism IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* polarizes critics and scholars of the American literary canon. Its admirers, led by Harold Bloom, argue that *Blood Meridian* is "the greatest single book since Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*" (Pierce). Its detractors, led by James Wood, believe the novel cements McCarthy's status as "one of the great hams of American prose" ("Red Planet"). This chapter aligns more with the interpretations and ideas of *Blood Meridian*'s detractors than its fiery supporters, those "fans, devotees, obsessives, Southern and Southwestern history buffs, and fiercely protective academic scholars" that Wood views himself in contention with ("Red Planet"). Because it is full of gobbledygook, what Wood calls "not just melodrama but imprecision and, occasionally, something close to nonsense" ("Red Planet"). And it is a deeply immoral novel, one that beautifies slaughter and genocide and then absolves the perpetrators through a philosophy of determinism. But *Blood Meridian* understands the importance that disinformation, vagaries and occlusion hold in discourses of power, and how such power allows for immoral behavior to persist. *Blood Meridian* endures as an incredibly powerful novel precisely because it avoids clarity and precision.

McCarthy's novel loosely follows the wanderings of the kid,⁸⁸ a teenage runaway, along the Mexican-American borderlands just after the end of the Mexican-American War (1846-48). He joins a party of American filibusterers, survives a one-sided skirmish with the Comanche and lands himself in a Chihuahua prison. There the Glanton Gang, a band of professional scalp hunters, recruit him to exterminate the surrounding Indian population under the orders of the Chihuahua governor. The focus of the novel shifts, and the kid becomes a minor character within the Glanton Gang. They roam the Mexican countryside murdering Indians and Mexicans alike until the Mexican army drives them back across the border. They take over operation of a ferry on the Colorado River, robbing travelers, enslaving women and double-crossing the Yuma Indians. Most of the gang are massacred by the Yuma in retaliation, and the remaining few head west across the desert, where a showdown occurs between the kid and a fellow gang member, the judge. The novel jumps thirty years ahead, and the kid again encounters the judge in a Texas dancehall, where the judge murders the kid in an adjacent outhouse. But readers often struggle to follow *Blood Meridian*'s plot, and the novel is better understood as a series of ultraviolent vignettes and lengthy soliloquies spaced out along a meandering journey through the desert. What we see (the inflated, split-open snout of a snake-bit horse; a tree of dead babies, hooked under jaw to the branches; a caged imbecile covered in and eating his own feces) takes precedence. What the judge tells us to think about these sights (might makes right; war conveys the truest form of divination; every man's will manifests a larger, unknowable will) takes precedence. The plot largely feels like an excuse to show violence and speak philosophically.

In *Blood Meridian*'s opening chapter the judge, a seven-foot, polyglottic, autodidactic sociopath, uses disinformation, vagaries and occlusion to incite mob violence. He convinces a congregation to turn against an itinerant preacher, Reverend Green, through a series of sexual allegations which may or may not be true:

Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man [Reverend Green] holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution

88. The monikers of *Blood Meridian*'s two main characters, "kid" and "judge," are never capitalized.

recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualification to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purpose of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth, the gentleman standing here before you posing as a minister of the Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas [...] On a variety of charges the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God [...] Not three weeks before this he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat. (4)

The judge's claims on Green's illegitimacy, illiteracy, pedophilia and zoophilia lead Green's congregants to shoot up his tent revival and chase him from town. Shortly after, the judge will reveal he "was never in Fort Smith in my life" and "never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" (4-5). Either the judge is a powerfully persuasive false witness, or he has reached into Green's history and discovered the truth, which means he is a powerfully omniscient mind reader. Since the reader never knows which conclusion to draw, we are never able to properly classify or categorize the judge's abilities. We are never able, as literary critics, to be what the judge might call "suzerains" of the judge's character. But the formality of his address ("ladies and gentlemen," "papers of divinity," "livery of his God") and the poetry of his language ("recognized or improvised / piety he despises," "for the purpose / fraudulent sermons," "good book / faint flavor") makes him a voice of *pleasurable* authority.⁸⁹

What does it mean to be a suzerain of information? Suzerainty generally refers to the medieval relationship between lord and vassal, but the judge explains that the power of scholarship—identifying, understanding and classifying his earthly surroundings—is as important as the physical or political power a lord can wield. "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge," he tells Toadvine, "exists without my consent," and "only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (195). His taxidermal dressing and stuffing of birds constitutes a rudimentary form of scholarship in preparation for his ultimate goal to "have them all in zoos" (195). The judge's desire for dominion extends to the art of other men: he sketches and then destroys an ancient Hueco rock painting to have sole ownership over its symbolic message. The Hueco's artistic statement has been replaced by the judge's scholarly reinterpretation, so that any future interpretation of the Hueco's rock painting can only begin from the judge's sketch. Like Nazis burning books, the judge ensures that only his interpretation of the Hueco's art will live on.

McCarthy's mythological status among a segment of literary critics comes in part from his unwillingness to interact with us—to assist in the project of classifying and understanding his work. David Kushner calls him "the most celebrated recluse in American literature since J.D. Salinger" ("Cormac McCarthy's Apocalypse"). Even in McCarthy's days of poverty he refused paid speaking engagements at universities, and he still politely declines to accept his literary awards in person.⁹⁰ "Teaching writing is a hustle," opines McCarthy about MFA programs

89. The judge's formality and poetry emphasize the contrast with the townsfolks' response: "Let's hang the turd" and "Why damn my eyes if I won't shoot the son of a bitch."

90. "We lived in total poverty," McCarthy's second ex-wife recalled. "We were bathing in the lake. Someone would call up and offer him \$2,000 to come speak at a university about his books. And he would tell them that everything he had to say was there on the page. So we would eat beans for another week" (Woodward).

(Woodward, “Venomous Fiction”). He has participated in only a handful of interviews across his fifty-year publishing history. And when he does converse with academia, he eschews literary critics and fellow creative writers in favor of scientists (McCarthy has become a fixture at the Santa Fe Institute, a multidisciplinary research center). One wonders if the suicidal, nihilistic literary professor in *The Sunset Limited* (2011) represents McCarthy’s broader opinion of our cohort. But importantly, one can only wonder about McCarthy’s opinions and ideas, and that lack of intellectual certainty seems intentional on McCarthy’s part. Being understood represents the first step to being controlled: to becoming like the flora, fauna, and primitive artwork the judge keeps in his satchel.

Despite McCarthy’s half-century of silence there has been a wealth of valuable research into the genealogy of *Blood Meridian*: the historical source material, the authorial antecedents, and the theological and philosophical traditions which inspired McCarthy’s work. Given this wealth, Kurt Cavender laments, a proper “accounting for [*Blood Meridian*’s] interpretive diversity has become practically its own sub-genre of McCarthy criticism,” in which “competing regionalisms, theoretical commitments, periodization schema, and genealogies of literary influence” jockey for position (694). Stephen Pastore complains that “if McCarthy really intended everything that critics say he put into his works, including the myriad stylistic and syntactical attributes, it would be a miracle if he could have written even one novel in his forty some-odd years as a writer” (12). Vereen Bell, an early McCarthy scholar, admits that “writing about McCarthy is an oddly embarrassing project because one is always saying either more or less than needs to be said”; his novels “seem finally to call all theses into question” (xiii). But Jack Hitt, in an essay on a hermetic scholar of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), conveys the seduction of such intense scholarship: “It’s the sensation of putting these bits together and the pleasure, when it happens, of suddenly *getting* it — the joke, the story, the book — that compels you throughout” (“The Strange Case”). McCarthy’s reclusive lifestyle and opaque prose have compelled his most ardent followers to keep searching through author and text for a better understanding of both, and such scholarly obsession bakes profundity into itself. The more time we spend on understanding McCarthy’s words, the greater value and meaning we imbue them with, a snowballing of literary significance. Such scholarly endeavors also help us understand our world, and McCarthy remains relevant in the post-Atomic Age because of his focus on humanity’s capacity for evil. Reading McCarthy taps into and satiates anxieties about the fate of our species.⁹¹ The judge, speaking on “his work as a scientist,” conveys a similar sentiment towards scholarly investigation: “The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear ... But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world” (195-96). Mastering a difficult set of information provides a rewarding experience: it produces pleasure, courage, and empowerment. For those of us who find *Blood Meridian* and the judge deeply unsettling, who read the novel alongside our anxiety over contemporary American politics, it stands to reason that mastering the novel would provide us some of those comforting rewards.

But to do such work on *Blood Meridian*, to assert the novel’s meaning through a catalogue of McCarthy’s possible literary, philosophical, and religious influences, mimics the behavior of the judge, arguably the greatest monster of twentieth-century American literature. Such scholarly work attempts to illuminate, clarify and classify a text whose writer, in both public performance and textual description, has purposefully left darkened and opaque. We cannot deconstruct *Blood*

91. None more so than McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), a postapocalyptic novel in which all plant life on Earth is dead, and a father and son walk across America waiting to die.

Meridian without taking apart the judge, the novel's most powerful character, and the narrator will by novel's end make clear that a genealogical deconstruction of the judge is impossible:

Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. (302)

In short, whatever forensic accounting we undertake through history books and literary forebears to explain McCarthy's villain, we will never find an answer. The judge looms over the novel, shares the same voice as the narrator, survives when all other characters die, and mirrors what little we know about McCarthy's attitude towards science, warfare and mankind's capacity for virtue. If we cannot make sense of where the judge comes from or what he judges, perhaps we should recognize the limitations of trying to deconstruct and make sense of *Blood Meridian*. We should recognize how the imprecision of McCarthy's words muddies our ability to perform a taxonomic classification of his ideas. The words and punctuation of *Blood Meridian* suggest a writer who specializes in the non-generic sense of literary mystery. The novel is awash with archaic terms. Phrases in Spanish, French, Latin, and German go untranslated. Technical language goes unexplained. Commas are sparse; quotation marks and semicolons are non-existent. McCarthy believes the latter are "idiocy" (Woodward, "Cormac Country"). The novel requires an atlas and encyclopedia to identify landmarks and lifeforms. The internet has reduced some of these barriers, but there remains the implausible possibility that *Blood Meridian* was designed to be read with a stack of reference books in arm's reach. On the contrary, the novel was designed to be read with faith, with a belief that all the science and history contained within are true, and that the judge's disquisition on life and morality contain the weight of truth.

I perform what I would call an agnotological reading, which is to resign oneself to the near-impossible difficulty of decoding *Blood Meridian* and instead theorize what function that near-impossible difficulty performs. I argue that McCarthy utilizes complex language and obscure references to give the novel's voice an air of authority. While we traditionally associate complex language and obscure references with unenjoyable reading (like tax forms or terms-of-service agreements), McCarthy combines them with poetic devices to make his voice of authority a pleasurable one. He wields this authority against established scholarly institutions both theological and secular. This multipart rhetorical strategy serves as a distraction from and an argument for the problematic implications that arise from his work, including what we come to find about mankind's capacity for virtue, and about ourselves, in our own perverse enjoyment of violence. *Blood Meridian's* critics have long wrestled with "the contrast between the unrelenting violence of the text and the sumptuous language in which it is depicted," in John Cant's estimation (160). But if we stipulate that violence is pleasurable and inescapable, that we engage in violence not just for some economic or political end but for sheer enjoyment, then no contradiction exists. The authority assigned to both judge and narrator by their complex and obscure language encourages us to accept that stipulation. War "endures," the judge tells us, "because young men love it and old men love it in them. Those that fought, those that did not" (246). That is, war gives us more than capital or power; war is an end unto itself, a satisfying of some primal urge. McCarthy's narrative voice matches that of the judge in Reverend Green's tent: a pleasurable authority whose words serve to justify our complicity in violence.

Agnotology and Ignorant Readings

The formal study of ignorance began relatively recently: Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana's *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (2007) and Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger's *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008) self-identify as foundational texts in a new field of research, with Marilyn Frye's *The Politics of Reality* (1983) and Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* (1997) as their forebears. These theorists view ignorance not simply as an absence of knowledge but as a strategic form of meaning-making. I find the simplest example of this sort of ignorance in an optical illusion. When our brain cannot process a complicated or confusing image, it changes that image into one which it can process. Dots, lines, colors and movement which do not exist become visible, while the complicated or confusing pieces of information becomes erased. This ocular organizing saves us time and energy. Coherent illusions register faster and easier than complicated or confusing realities. Agnotology applies these ideas to a sociological context: it considers why some facts are misunderstood or rejected by certain members of society. It considers why some witnesses are deemed more trustworthy than others. Agnotology views ignorance as a form of epistemology, a way of making sense of things we do not actually want to understand. Of course, sometimes we cherish ignorance: we expect the government to be relatively ignorant of our private lives, and we consider this ignorance a good thing (Proctor 2). Other times ignorance protects us: when we invoke the Fifth Amendment, we use ignorance to avoid incrimination. And agnotology does not blame ignorance on a lack of education. On the contrary, agnotology has focused primarily on institutional ignorance, on experts who ignore or misrepresent facts to serve some larger institutional goal. Say, phrenology—the pseudo-scientific study of racial differences in human skulls—as a justification for slavery. The “why” of institutional ignorance can often be boiled down to the “why” of an optical illusion: it saves us time and energy. Because phrenology justified slavery and resolved the contradiction between America's love of freedom and its desire for free labor, nineteenth-century scientists pursued it and industrialists funded it.⁹² White Americans found it simpler and easier to believe in racial inequality than to dismantle the complex system of chattel slavery that benefitted them. Ignorance is the way we resolve contradictions and facts we do not like, the way we lie to ourselves and others to make life easier.

But how does this notion of ignorance work within *Blood Meridian*? Here “ignorance” entails the process by which we assign *Blood Meridian* authority over its subject matter. When reading literature, we question how accurately it reflects history, society and the human condition, and how relevant its social criticisms are to our contemporary world. To answer these highly subjective questions, a novel works to curry good faith with its readers, to establish an authority it cannot definitively prove. A novel encourages its readers to believe that its ideas have value and importance within the larger marketplace of ideas. Obviously not every novel cares about these things, but many do. *Blood Meridian* seems to care desperately. It speaks in an ancient, biblical, masculine register, obsessively circles back to death and dying, and borrows heavily from canonical writers and privileged literary traditions. It includes a wealth of scientific, historical and theological references that suggest a well-read author. McCarthy designed and developed these rhetorical strategies to convey authority. An agnotological reading interrogates that authority when

92. For a broader consideration of how phrenology shaped nineteenth-century philosophy and literature, see Neil Irvin Painter's *The History of White People* (2010) and John Lardas Modern's *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011).

the novel, by its sheer denseness and difficulty, actively resists questioning and unpacking.⁹³ It concedes that the novel is never fully unpackable, and instead considers how and why the author chose to keep it a mystery.

Blood Meridian is often labeled an anti-Western, a novel which subverts popular myths about heroic gunslingers and the American West. *Blood Meridian* relies on obscure historical details—bits and pieces from history books and firsthand accounts—to enhance this subversion.⁹⁴ It undercuts earlier Western narratives by presenting itself as more historically accurate and therefore more truthful. For example, consider *Blood Meridian*'s fictional Captain White, an amalgamation of two historical figures, William Walker and Henry Alexander Crabb. In chapter III, Captain White's filibusters set off for Sonora in the spring of 1849 with "the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California" (34). McCarthy scholar John Sepich traces the phrase "tacit support" to *Freebooters Must Die!* (1976), Frederic Rosengarten's biography of William Walker. Rosengarten writes that when Walker invaded Nicaragua in 1855, "the United States authorities in California gave Walker their *tacit approval*" (75, emphasis added). Walker received tacit approval from military leaders, not Governor Burnett, who left office years ago, and Walker was actually prosecuted by the California government for his filibustering efforts. Neither was Governor Burnett in office when the fictional Captain White headed to Sonora in 1849. But the reference to Governor Burnett gives Captain White's fictional filibustering an air of historical authenticity. Sepich traces the pickling of White's dismembered head to *Crabb's Filibustering Expedition into Sonora, 1857* (1952), Robert Forbes's biography of Henry Alexander Crabb. Like Captain White, Crabb's head was interred in vinegar and his body was fed to pigs (Forbes 23). All three of these men were executed by the foreign governments they defied. These minor details suggest McCarthy's keen interest in presenting his novel as authentically real. His novel passes a cursory historical examination: if a skeptical reader opens a reference book to challenge McCarthy's interpretation of the West, they find enough historical parallels to justify the novel's obscene violence, because almost all the novel's major characters, and many of its minor ones, have a historical counterpart. Such historicism departs from McCarthy's other fiction: while *Suttree* (1979) and *The Stone Mason* (1994) draw on personal experiences, none of McCarthy's stories repurpose history to the degree of *Blood Meridian*. This historical investment proactively responds to claims that *Blood Meridian* sensationalizes violence: McCarthy justifies *Blood Meridian*'s bloody scenes by finding similar examples in historical source material. Collectively, this history works alongside science and theology to build the novel's authoritative voice. The degree to which these scholarly references overlap and intertwine makes it incredibly difficult to

93. Kurt Cavender makes a related move in "Our Knowing Compelled to Go Back," borrowing from the Hegelian concept of "speculative misreading" to suggest that *Blood Meridian* is not meant to be understood, but rather to be continuously misread and reread, with each new attempt producing a new set of meanings.

94. For more on the novel's relationship to American historiography and the mythology of the West, see John Sepich's *Notes on Blood Meridian: Revised and Expanded Edition* (2008) and Rick Wallach's *They Rode On: Blood Meridian and the Tragedy of the American West* (2013). Also see Susan Kollin's "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western," Dan Moos' "Lacking the Article Itself: Representation and History in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," Adam Parkes' "History, Bloodshed, and the Spectacle of American Identity in *Blood Meridian*," Timothy Parrish's "History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy's Western Novels," Dana Phillips' "History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*," Paul Sheehan's "Western Scourge: Myth, Language, and Law in *Blood Meridian* and *Deadwood*," and Billy Stratton's "'El Brujo Es Un Coyote': Taxonomies of Trauma in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*."

deconstruct this authoritative voice. Instead, we read the novel ignorantly and have faith in the novel's command of the facts.⁹⁵

The Prestige of Violence: *Blood Meridian* in the Post-War Tradition

How does someone evaluate and interpret a writer's description of a child being scalped? What life experiences could we draw from to evaluate such an image? When McCarthy saturates his novel with extreme violence, he crafts a perspective that almost no one can challenge. We do not know what a tree of dead babies looks like, let alone a snake-bit horse or a gut-shot man. The rarity of these experiences, particularly within the privileged ranks of academia, gives testimonies of violence an epistemological currency. If someone has witnessed such violence, or can at least claim to have witnessed such violence, they become a knowledgeable authority on death, suffering, abjection and sublimity. Witnessing and experiencing violence subverts the way we traditionally privilege testimony along lines of race and class. Dominant groups are more likely to control institutions of knowledge, but marginalized groups are more likely to bear direct witness to violence. And the value we assign to knowledge of violence corresponds to the degree to which we are removed from violence. Violence's epistemological currency relies on its liminality: it should be distant enough to maintain scarcity, but also close enough to remain almost visible, just out of reach, somewhere on the borderlands of our experience.

Twentieth-century authors have made a hefty sum trading in the epistemological currency of violence, both in terms of book sales and scholarly acclaim. Sally Bachner's *The Prestige of Violence* (2011) considers why violence became a common subject in America's most celebrated postwar novels: the works of Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison and Vladimir Nabokov, among others. More specifically, Bachner questions why these novels represent violence in the same way: materially absent, unable to be spoken, but also supremely important, a thing which shapes and protects our privileged existence. She boils it down to positionality. Critics, scholars, and influential readers celebrate novels which reflect their own relationship to violence:

The fascination with violence that underwrites fiction and theory of the period is an index of the discomfort that privileged Americans feel by virtue of the fact that they are at once citizens of a relatively peaceful and prosperous society and the inhabitants of a larger, much less peaceful and prosperous world. At the heart of this anxiety is the suspicion that the violence and suffering that takes place elsewhere is the product of the very economic and political practices that guarantee U.S. prosperity and security. The structural opposition between violence and conventional language, and the foregrounding of a violence guaranteed by its material absence at the center of American life, enables a deeply therapeutic and illusory reckoning with that violence. It converts the typical perception of violence held by members of the nation's dominant class—that it cannot be directly experienced, that it is most present in its absence, that it evades conventional discourse—into a truth about violence itself. (5)

95. Or we put the book down. Even critics who have come to praise *Blood Meridian* (Bloom, Stephen Pastore, Amy Hungerford) share a common story of giving up on the novel in its first one hundred pages: too violent, too pretentious, too repetitive. Katya Laug, in a roundtable on *Blood Meridian* at the University of Warwick, argued that "the first time you read the book, you're not supposed to enjoy it [...] you're not supposed to love it. It's horrific [...] I remember [a colleague] saying he's an acquired taste, and I think that has to be true. I find it odd that we live in an environment where reading 350 pages of blatant, obvious, gruesome violence is enjoyable. I'm not saying I'm not enjoying it, but I've read it several times" (Laug).

Bachner offers a fairly logical claim: our positionality towards violence in society determines our attitude towards violence in literature. Critics and tastemakers come from and exist in relatively safe communities but are also, as knowledgeable citizens of the world, keenly aware of the literal and structural violence that takes place outside those communities. They therefore seek out and celebrate texts which reflect that viewpoint, and then theorize that viewpoint into objective truth. Graphically violent texts, in turn, become marginalized as pulp or genre fiction, i.e. as lowbrow literature. Bachner interprets these evaluations as a privileging of dominant perspectives by people who cannot speak on violence simply because they have little or no direct experience. She essentially accuses critics and tastemakers of acting like phrenologists, of classifying literary depictions of violence as highbrow or lowbrow through a class-based subjectivity believed to be unvarnished truth.

Bachner cites McCarthy as a counterexample to unspeakable violence, because Bachner finds McCarthy's writing "endlessly demonstrates the way that violence can indeed be represented" (5). I would somewhat modify this claim: *Blood Meridian* shows that violence can be represented, but it does so from the position of spectator, not participant. It removes all interiority and instead describes the surfaces: blood, wounds, corpses, scalps, etc. Perhaps part of the rise in popularity of *Blood Meridian* over the last thirty years stems from privileged Americans' increased access to images of violence, from news reports, film and television, and internet videos. You could, in a matter of seconds, put down this chapter and watch people being scalped online. *Blood Meridian*'s narrator serves as a cultural translator, a go-between that allows privileged Americans access to lives within marginalized communities. In *Blood Meridian*, these communities include Indians, mestizos and borderlands criminals. In doing so, the narrator claims an authority over their lives: he speaks for them, albeit without their consent. Like the judge sketching and destroying the Hueco's rock painting, a cultural translator asserts suzerainty over a marginalized community's experiences. As readers, we treat the narrator's authority like an epistemological currency. We spend this currency by inserting the novel's ideas into debates over American military interventionism, the role of the Catholic church, and the efficacy of non-violent resistance, among other questions. We speak authoritatively about such subjects because we read about them in a book.

Sea Cucumbers and Scientism

Nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed contemplating Adam's fall distracted men from their own sins. Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) that "the man of science ought to forget himself" (51). In other words, a man of science should maintain his objectivity in scientific matters. But in spiritual matters, in regards to the origin of sin, if a man of science "magnanimously wants to forget himself [...] in his zeal to explain all of humanity," he will only become an ignorant fool (51).⁹⁶ Science requires objective observation, but salvation requires subjective introspection. Using the tools of the former to achieve the goals of the latter only results in self-deception and endless chatter.⁹⁷ A man of science who focuses on the salvation

95. I use "ignorant fool" to replace Kierkegaard's lengthy analogy. The man of science would "become as comical as that privy councilor who was so conscientious about parting with his calling card to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that in doing so he finally forgot his own name. Or his philosophical enthusiasm will make him so absentminded that he needs a good-natured, level-headed wife, whom he can ask, as Soldin asked Rebecca, when in enthusiastic absentmindedness he too lost himself in the objectivity of chatter: 'Rebecca, is it I who am speaking?'" (51).

97. Horton 123.

of others will ultimately forget and forego his own salvation. Multiple scholars have traced the Kierkegaardian threads in McCarthy's fiction, and McCarthy included the note "Kierkegaard: Abraham and Issac" in his first draft of *The Road* (2006) (Noble 93).⁹⁸ In *Blood Meridian*, scientific language in spiritual matters by narrator and judge operate in a Kierkegaardian model of deceptive chatter. Kierkegaard found such chatter comical, but McCarthy deploys it to evoke horror and enthrall readers. Judge and narrator speak and speak, and their complex, technical language carries the authority of an omniscient scientist. The judge repeatedly enthralls others with authoritative, technical language: the tent revival of Reverend Green, the munitions purchase with Speyer, and the investigation of Owens' murder all show the judge either excusing or enacting murder simply through his specialized words.⁹⁹ During his penultimate confrontation with the kid, the judge's rhetorical abilities are so persuasive that the ex-priest Tobin pleads with the kid to cover his ears:

Dont listen, he said.

I aint listenin.

Stop your ears.

Stop yours.

The priest cupped his hands over his ears and looked at the kid. His eyes were bright from the bloodloss and he was possessed of a great earnestness. Do it, he whispered. Do you think he speaks to me? (287)

The judge's captivating, deadly words were legalese: "points of jurisprudence," "laws pertaining to property rights" and "cases of attainder" (286). Their power contrasts with the language of the ex-priest, who moments earlier bore down on the judge with a crucifix made from bones while "calling out in a tongue both alien and extinct" (283). The ex-priest's xenoglossia marks his return to Christian faith, as here the narrator names him priest, not ex-priest. His linguistic confrontation of the judge fails: the judge promptly shoots him, and the ex-priest goes silent. By the novel's logic, might makes right, and the judge's language of legal scholarship proves more powerful than the Christian tongue.

In *Blood Meridian*, the specialized languages of science, law and history enthrall both readers and characters alike. The judge deploys such language as a means to enact and justify horrific violence, but the narrator aids him in this endeavor by depicting the nineteenth-century Mexican-American borderlands as an irredeemable hellscape. Readers believe the narrator's descriptions largely because of his pleasurable, rhetorical authority. As an example of how specialized language and description imbues the voice of the novel with a pleasurable authority,

98. For connections between McCarthy and Kierkegaard, see Steven Frye's "History, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy"; J. D. Canfield's "Crossing from the Wasteland into the Exotic in McCarthy's Border Trilogy"; and Manuel Broncano's *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction*, particularly "The Virgin, the Whore, the Pimp, and the Monk."

99. During the munitions purchase with Speyer on the outskirts of Chihuahua City, Glanton tests out Speyer's pistols by killing a cat and two chickens, then shooting a nearby bell. When a detachment of Mexican soldiers come to investigate, the judge enthralls them with scholarship on black Jackson's origins: "He adduced for their consideration references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from the Greek poets, anthropological speculations as to the propagation of the races in their dispersion and isolation through the agency of geological cataclysm and an assessment of racial traits with respect to climatic and geographical influences. The sergeant listened to this and more with great attention and when the judge was done he stepped forward and held out his hand" (77-78). Sergeant Aguilar forgets Glanton's crimes and instead treats the scalp hunters as honored guests.

consider the narrator's description of a campfire: "The bones of cholla that glowed there in their incandescent basketry pulsed like burning holothurians in the phosphorous dark of the sea's deeps" (240). Cholla are cacti; their poriferous skeletons resemble a woven basket. Holothurians are sea cucumbers; they sometimes bioluminesce. The narrator, by comparing these two lifeforms from two starkly different environments, suggests a grand design beyond men's reasoning, a "thread of order" in the tapestry of the world. Following this description, the judge gives a disquisition on the ordering of the universe. The reader feels compelled to believe him, to have faith in the judge, largely because the narrator's holothurian comparison primes them to.

Both readers and the judge's listeners would find it difficult to evaluate the accuracy of this comparison. No one sitting around that campfire (no one sitting around the nineteenth century, period) had the faintest idea of what a pulsing, bioluminescent deep-sea holothurian looked like except the judge, if we believe in his suzerainty of knowledge. If a reader wishes to challenge and investigate the narrator's comparison, they require a specialized vocabulary (cholla, holothurians) and a tolerance for contradictions (dark cannot be phosphorous, holothurians cannot burn). They also require a basic idea of what deep-sea bioluminescence looks like, which almost no one had in 1985 when the novel was published.

Why does it matter whether the comparison is accurate? If we ignore that question, then the sentence is successful: it encourages readers to simply take for granted the taxonomical mastery of narrator, judge and author and not worry about how that knowledge was produced and what ideological goals it will be used for. Our faith in the judge's suzerainty of the natural world forms an epistemological currency, and when the judge later enacts or facilitates murder, or speaks on the supremacy of war, the reader believes he has the right to do so. The taxonomical mastery possessed by the voice of the novel entralls us into believing its larger ideas about man's capacity for evil and the inescapability of violence. McCarthy's opaque language and lengthy sentences encourage readers to take pleasure in the alliterative sounds his sentences produce, and to associate that sonic coherence with a coherence of imagery, rather than open a series of reference books and interrogate the comparison's accuracy. The rhetorical strategy relies on our own epistemic ignorance towards matters of natural science.

A quick primer on deep-sea bioluminescence, only to prove that McCarthy's image is inaccurate, and readers and characters would be unable to tell otherwise: for millennia sailors and fisherman have witnessed the so-called "burning seas," the phosphorescent glow of sea life at the water's surface (Harvey 40). In the early 1930s, William Beebe and Otis Barton used a bathysphere to travel 300-800 meters below the surface and witness deep-sea bioluminescence *in situ* (in its natural environment); their descriptions of the phenomena made them "the toast of all the newspapers and newsreels" and "ranked Beebe and Barton among the outrageous daredevils who were capturing the imaginations of a nation" (Anctil 278). During World War II the glowing of sea life allowed for ships and submarines to be identified and attacked, inspiring the Office of Naval Research to fund bioluminescence studies in the 1950s and 60s (Anctil 356). Visual recordings of bioluminescence came about in the early 1970s; Jim Case, through his relationship with the US Navy, gained access to the US Army's Starlight Scope, the night-vision device mounted on rifles in the Vietnam War. The capacity for bioluminescence in holothurians was not discovered until 1974 (Herring 401). But glowing specimens, captured by deep-sea rovers produced by the US Navy, lost their bioluminescence and died shortly after being brought to the surface. It was not until 1989, when Edith Widder used a rover developed by the oil and gas industry and modified with a SPLAT CAM (a mesh surface which bumped into sea life and stimulated light) that deep-sea bioluminescence was filmed *in situ* (Widder). In short, four years

passed after the publication of *Blood Meridian* before anyone other than a handful of scientists and rover pilots knew what the pulsing light of deep-sea bioluminescence looked like. Do bioluminescent holothurians look like burning cholla wood? No. They are translucent, and their luminescence comes primarily from the tips of their tentacles and papillae, tiny points of light spread out along its surface (Herring 406). The glow from these extremities illuminates a long, solid, coiled intestine within their interior. Their light does not pulse, and only appears when the holothurian is threatened. Benthic (seafloor) holothurians look like large, tentacled slugs; researchers and enthusiasts colloquially refer to pelagic (swimming) holothurians as headless chicken monsters (“Headless”). Neither group resembles cholla wood. McCarthy likely mixed together a series of related images to produce his inspired comparison, and then used the term holothurians, rather than sea cucumbers, to suggest scientific precision (and to enhance alliteration).¹⁰⁰ Taken collectively, these images made the narrator’s comparison close enough to reality to pass as something real. The comparison sounds accurate enough to be true and contains enough complexity to discourage readers from challenging it. Alliteration and rhyming (cholla/glowed/holothurians, bones/basketry/burning) provide a sonic coherence that reinforces the presumed imagistic coherence. And in a small way, this scientific poetry pushes readers to believe in the textual voice’s authority, a voice which includes judge, narrator, and McCarthy himself.

The narrator’s descriptions and the judge’s orations sound alike and work together to craft the voice of the novel. Immediately before the comparative sentence we see the judge, “Half naked, scribbling in his ledger ... the wind fanned the coals that he watched” (240). We see and read what the judge sees and writes through a holothurian comparison only he could credibly make. Two days and two pages later, at the next campfire, the judge will deliver an oration on the ordering of the world:

The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance beset with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddled field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (242)

The judge’s claim of a world and universe filled with unknowable unknowns delegitimizes all previous systems of knowing, most importantly that of Christianity. And the power of the judge’s oration depends on the authority already invested in judge, narrator, and author by sentences like the holothurian comparison above. Deconstructing that authority rests on decades of oceanographic research funded and facilitated by America’s armed forces and fossil fuel industry.

100. McCarthy may have seen *Holothuria mexicana*, or donkey dung sea cucumbers, in local markets; they are a popular delicacy heavily fished in the shallow waters along Mexico and Central America. When boiled and left out to dry, they have the shape, texture, and coloring of a charred log of wood. Holothurians do not have sharp spines like a cactus, but their sister clade the sea urchin does. And while holothurians do not have the poriferous surface of cholla wood, some microscopic ossicles of benthic holothurians do.

We cannot prove the judge wrong or challenge his suzerainty without engaging in his own behavior: without killing and collecting the life forms of alien landscapes in partnership with larger militarist and capitalist endeavors. We cannot disprove the judge without acting like the judge. And by acting like the judge, we prove his larger point: war and greed are inescapable. Besides, by learning the inaccuracy of the narrator's comparison, the comparison loses some of its pleasurable coherence. Reading the novel with a measure of ignorance and taking its authority for granted provides more enjoyment. At moments like this, *Blood Meridian* becomes science mythology: a heightened, epic version of reality which uses the language of taxonomical science to justify its larger interpretation of the world. At other points it works as a historical mythology, using the biographies of men large and small to enhance the plausibility of the narrative. And occasionally it works as a literary mythology, in its repeated allusions to scenes from *Paradise Lost*, *Moby Dick*, and the *Bible*. This wealth of scholarly knowledge invested into a narrative of ultraviolence encourages readers to associate violence with wisdom and reason.

None of this is to say that literature needs to be scientifically or historically accurate, but McCarthy uses the credibility attached to science, history, and canonical literature to defend *Blood Meridian's* nihilistic worldview against larger, more established cultural institutions. What holothurians are, or whether "burning holothurians" exist in nature, matters less than what the word *holothurians* sounds like: something a learned person would say. Holothurians could be any species of flora, fauna, or man so ancient or obscure that only an expert could recognize it. If the word *holothurians* connotes a measure of expertise generally limited to academics, the word is successful. The authority conveyed by such language globs onto the men who speak it—judge, narrator, McCarthy—and makes them into experts, into men of science whose thoughts on violence should be taken uncritically.

The Individual Over the Institution: *Blood Meridian's* Gnostic Template

McCarthy's antagonistic relationship with scholarly institutions extends to religious scholarship, i.e. theology. Like many writers before him, McCarthy's work challenges the sanctimony of the Catholic Church. As such, *Blood Meridian* expresses a form of anti-institutional Christianity that dates to the original Orthodox Church. Leo Daugherty and Petra Mundik have each identified *Blood Meridian's* relationship to gnosticism, a set of religious ideas developed in the first centuries after Christ's death.¹⁰¹ In their readings of *Blood Meridian*, the judge (like Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and the trio of killers in *Outer Dark* (1968)) is an *archon*, part of the demonic force (or *demiurge*) which created and controls our material world. The judge possesses supernatural abilities: he manipulates the trajectory of coins, lifts enormous meteorites, and appears like a mirage in the desert. The judge scalps children, drowns puppies, and rapes young girls. He never sleeps and says he will never die. But the judge only manifests the larger evil that appears throughout *Blood Meridian*: the novel contains landscapes, lifeforms, and armies all hellish in their description. This belief in omnipresent evil, according to Daugherty, separated gnosticism from other Christian traditions: "the Satan of Roman Catholicism, the Orthodox Church and the Protestant Reformation is a strikingly domesticated, manageable,

101. I follow Elaine Pagels's lead in not capitalizing gnosticism, even though it traditionally is capitalized. As I will explain further below, gnosticism is a postdated, catch-all term for a diverse set of religious groups. Capitalizing the term, I think, suggests a measure of uniformity and institutionalism that was absent from gnostic thought.

partitioned-off personification of evil as the Gnostics saw evil. They saw it as something so big that ‘evil’ is not really an applicable term—because it is too small. For them, evil was simply everything that *is*, with the exception of the bits of spirit imprisoned here” (162). Those bits of spirit represent *pneuma*, the spiritual traces of God and the part inside us which perpetually feels alienated. Gnostics seek an inner knowledge from *pneuma* called *gnosis*, which reveals their divine relationship to God. *Blood Meridian* has no interiority, so it has no obvious examples of *gnosis*. But it is awash with examples of outward evil and institutional decay, evidence that the material order of our world is bankrupt and ruined. By emulating the gnostic tradition of social and institutional critique, McCarthy positions his novel as an alternative authority, one that champions the will of the individual and denigrates the power of church and state.

No explicit references to gnosticism exist in *Blood Meridian*, and there is no reason to assume McCarthy intentionally borrowed from the ancient gnostics. Many critics have interpreted the novel’s religious imagery through Friedrich Nietzsche, who is sometimes labeled as a gnostic (Corngold 109).¹⁰² *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891) and gnosticism both share ancestry in Zoroastrianism. And the judge appears modeled on Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, a powerful man willing a post-God order into existence. The judge’s disquisition on moral law and historical law sounds similar to Nietzsche’s ideas on slave morality and master morality: justice and equality are tools of the weak to disenfranchise the strong. It would be just as valid to interpret the novel through Jacob Böhme, the source of *Blood Meridian*’s second epigraph: Böhme is often labeled as a gnostic, or as the “origin ... of Gnostic return in the modern field” (O’Regan 2). Böhme shared the gnostics’ dim view of the material world and their emphasis on self-guided, mystical inquiry. But whereas ancient gnosticism tended to be populist in nature, encouraging women, slaves, and other marginalized groups to preach and prophesize, Böhme’s brand of gnosticism had a tinge of intellectual elitism: “every one is not fit for or capable of the knowledge of the eternal and temporal nature in its mysterious operation, neither is the proud covetous world worthy to receive a clear manifestation of it; and therefore the only wise God ... has locked up the jewel in his blessed treasury, which none can open but those that have the key” (loc. 125). If you cannot understand his ideas—“his” meaning both Böhme and God—it is because you are unfit or incapable of doing so (and not because the ideas are vague, imprecise, confusing, implausible or wrong). Böhme, Nietzsche, and the gnostics were all part of a radical tradition in opposition to the dogma of the Christian church, so assigning any one of them the title of *Blood Meridian*’s forefather is less important than recognizing how they all pushed against institutional authority. This push allowed for a radical reconsideration of ethics, of man’s responsibility towards other men and other living creatures. In *Blood Meridian*, that radical reconsideration opens a door to the justification of violence, to man no longer bearing responsibility for the health and wellbeing of others.

It stands to reason that the parallels between the worldbuilding of the gnostics and the worldbuilding of McCarthy are designed with a similar goal: the delegitimization of received knowledge. The gnostics were fighting against the dogma of the Orthodox Church; what McCarthy

102. See Steven Frye’s “Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy”; Steven Shaviro’s “‘The Very Life of the Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*”; Eric Miles Williamson’s “*Blood Meridian* and Nietzsche: The Metaphysics of War”; and Linda Townley Woodson’s “Leaving the Dark Night of the Lie: A Kristevan Reading of Cormac McCarthy’s Border Fiction.” Manuel Brancano notes that “Whereas abundant scholarship exists about Nietzsche’s influence on McCarthy, to my knowledge only Frye has pointed out the potential implications of McCarthy’s familiarity with Heraclitus for our understanding of his fiction. As is well known, Nietzsche derived his conception of the eternal recurrence of the same from Heraclitus’s understanding of life and the world as cyclic” (5). Brancano’s lament points to the difficulty in pinning down just where McCarthy’s ideas came from.

is fighting against is a matter of interpretation. But that mystery, that inability to pin down what exactly McCarthy wants us to think, generates part of the novel's authority. One can take the narrative of *Blood Meridian* and claim it is anti-Western, anti-Reagan or anti-Vietnam. Academia has repeatedly generated this trio of left-leaning claims about *Blood Meridian*. But David Hallaway wonders "if [the] catalogue of very liberal approaches to *Blood Meridian* tells us more about the proclivities of academics, literary critics, as it does about the writing of Cormac McCarthy" ("Blood Meridian"). One could just as equally claim the novel criticizes Catholic social justice, the Anti-War Movement or the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps *Blood Meridian* shows why we need a loaded gun in every home, because men like the scalp hunters and the Comanche exist. Or perhaps it is "a deep, implicit warning for [...] our gun crazy country," as Harold Bloom claimed (Rahman). The novel allows for multiple, contradictory interpretations. It attacks and denigrates rather than defends. As a muddled dystopia, it is oppositional to whatever society or institution you want it to be against. McCarthy himself believes, "there's no such thing as life without bloodshed," and "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous" (Woodward, "Venomous Fiction"). I read this statement as a critique of socialism and other left-leaning ideologies, but the fact that so many scholars have taken the opposite approach to McCarthy shows the malleability of his ideas. The novel's lack of clarity and precision allows for multiple, contradictory interpretations to sound plausible. McCarthy speaks in large sentences devoid of punctuation, like a fiery sermon, chaining together multiple images with "and then" and "like some" to suggest a larger coherence in the world beyond our understanding. McCarthy deploys biblical imagery, but like gnosticism, he subverts the image's meaning. Apostles wandering the desert are now cold-blooded scalp hunters, Christ's sermons are now the judge's disquisitions, and burning bushes are now voiceless beacons for venomous reptiles. Because Christianity has historically been used as a framework for both the political left and right, *Blood Meridian* appeals to both left-leaning university professors and far-right xenophobes. If the reader identifies the gnostic connection, they identify *Blood Meridian* with a religious tradition persecuted, censored and demonized for centuries, a tradition that appeals to radicals and philosophers who feel themselves persecuted.

Gnosticism is not so much an organized religion as a classification of religious ideas antagonistic to Orthodox Christianity. What we now call gnosticism was "a syncretic blending of many influences, including Christian, Hellenic, Babylonian, Egyptian, Iranian, Jewish, and even the Eastern traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism" which manifested into "complex and often strikingly different mythologies" (Mundik loc. 968, Brakke 50-51). But central to gnosticism was the valuation of gnosis over dogma, of the individual over the institution. Elaine Pagels identifies abstract gnostic creations like archons as byproducts of a larger political struggle between gnostics and the church, between decentralizing and centralizing forces in early Christianity. Orthodox Christian leaders attempted to consolidate authority through clerical hierarchy and dogmatic scripture; gnostics, in turn, identified those religious leaders as servants of the demiurge misleading the laity away from gnosis. In this materialist interpretation, the dogma of Orthodox Christianity and the gnosis of gnosticism are not just belief systems; they are also strategic responses to the political realities of the religious communities which produced them. Pagels describes how Marcossian gnostics subverted clerical authority by drawing lots before each gathering to determine clerical roles:

At a time when the orthodox Christians increasingly discriminated between clergy and laity, this group of gnostic Christians demonstrated that, among themselves, they refused to acknowledge such distinctions. Instead of ranking their members into superior and inferior “orders” within a hierarchy, they followed the principle of strict equality. All initiates, men and women alike, participated equally in the drawing; anyone might be selected to serve as *priest*, *bishop*, or *prophet*. Furthermore, because they cast lots at each meeting, even the distinctions established by lot could never become permanent “ranks.” Finally—most important—they intended, through this practice, to remove the element of human choice. A twentieth-century observer might assume that the gnostics left these matters to random chance, but the gnostics saw it differently. They believed that since God directs everything in the universe, the way the lots fell expressed his choice. (loc. 1205-16)

These gnostics were so wary of social relationships and institutional authority they would not allow themselves to choose priests, bishops, and prophets: random chance was a better guide than communal debate or written decree. McCarthy readers will see parallels in Anton Chigurh’s coin flips, or the *bufones*’ tarot reading, or the judge’s oration on mortal wagers: “This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war ... the truest form of divination” (246-47). The Marcosians’ lottery and McCarthy’s cards and coins all speak directly to a higher authority and circumvent any institutional ethics on who should speak and who should die. Daugherty views McCarthy’s villains as archons, but they may very well be “good” gnostics. They reject received knowledge and look for true knowledge themselves. The violence they do to corporeal bodies is cruel, but unimportant, since corporeal bodies are part of the demiurge’s creation. The knowledge the judge shares with the scalp hunters is what matters to gnostics; the sins he commits do not.

The gnostics did not advocate for immoral behavior; they simply encouraged practitioners not to worry about it, whether they were victims or perpetrators. Hans Jonas’s *The Gnostic Religion* (1962) argued that the “anticosmic attitude” of gnosticism entailed “the denial of any worth to the things of this world and consequently also to man’s doings in this world”:

To the gnostics, “looking towards God” means just such a denial: it is a jumping across all intervening realities, which for this direct relationship are nothing but fetters and obstacles, or distracting temptations, or at best irrelevant. The sum of these intervening realities is the world, including the social world. The surpassing interest in salvation, the exclusive concern in the destiny of the transcendent self, “denatures” as it were these realities and takes the heart out of the concern with them where such a concern is unavoidable. (loc. 5243-5266)

Sins distract and tempt, laws hinder and obscure, and worrying about virtue only gets in the way of gnosis. The gnostics treated earthly matters, including the concept of salvation, with the same detached objectivity as Kierkegaard’s man of science. The evil behavior of the judge evidences the demiurge’s influence over his soul, but since the judge seeks true knowledge of the universe’s order and meaning, his behavior is immaterial. Behavior does not cause suffering; ignorance causes suffering. According to Jonas, gnostic texts contain no passages on virtue because virtue was unimportant to them (loc. 5453). This same amorality makes *Blood Meridian* so terrifying: the implication that the judge is smarter than us, that he is smarter than us because he does not worry about morality, that our morality makes us weak. The central difference between gnosticism and Orthodox Christianity rests in the church’s belief that behavior on Earth is judged by God, that the rules for this behavior are found in church scripture, and our acceptance into Heaven depends on one’s willingness to follow those rules. The gnostics believed rules and judgement were tools

of the demiurge to keep us from gnosis. To be an ethical person is, at best, to be a misguided human. According to gnosticism, God did not create the institutional authorities which tell us how to behave (Mosaic law, Roman law, Hellenist virtue, etc.), so their laws are worthless and best ignored. Gnostics pejoratively retranslated the names these authorities gave to God into names for the demiurge (Jonas loc. 1203). Christians who follow the Orthodox Church live as “dumb animals,” according to the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, and “messengers of error,” according to the *Apocalypse of Peter* (Meyer 482, 494). In many ways, gnostic texts were just as lofty and vague as the language of McCarthy. Gnosticism was devoid of explanations as to how gnosis was achieved, or what gnosis looked like.¹⁰³ But the gnostics clearly expressed their hatred towards theological institutions and the knowledge they dispensed. They spoke the original voice of opposition towards the authority of the Christian church.

One could reasonably say that *Blood Meridian* challenges the worldview of organized Christianity, but I suspect that claim is not large enough: it should include secular institutions like governments, universities, newspapers, corporations, political movements, etc. which have for centuries worked alongside or underneath Christian institutions. Readers can interpret *Blood Meridian* as an attack on the military interventions supported by the Religious Right, or they can interpret it as an attack on the social justice interventions supported by the Religious Left, because both ends of the political spectrum drew from Christian theology and clerical authority to shape and defend their opinions. The primacy of gnosis becomes the primacy of war in *Blood Meridian*, but both stand against larger narratives of the world’s order developed by or alongside Christianity. Gnosis fashions itself as an antidote to epistemic ignorance, to the false or misrepresented knowledge dispensed by scholarly institutions.

Every image of church or clergy in *Blood Meridian* evokes impotency and decay, and these qualities, in turn, emphasize the vitality of the judge. Ruined churches, priestly vultures and vulture-like priests abound. Reverend Green in chapter I finds himself chased out of town by his own parishioners. The floor of a ruined church in chapter II “was deep in dried guano and the droppings of cattle and sheep”; the church’s underlying foundation is metaphorically despoiled by literally being covered in feces (24). In its chancel, the area reserved for clergy, “three buzzards hobbled about on the picked bone carcass of some animal” (24). The carcass traditionally found in a chancel would be a wooden representation of the crucified body of Christ, below which priests symbolically share the body and blood of Christ with their parishioners through the sacrament. In McCarthy’s image, the rotting body ruins our appetite, and the vulture-priests do not look interested in sharing. The ruined church in chapter IV has its fallen timbers repurposed for firewood by the American filibusters (46). The physical institution has no symbolic meaning to these self-identified Christians; the church’s remnants are just a pile of material resources to be repurposed and consumed. In chapter V, vultures stretch their wings “in attitudes of exhortation like dark little bishops” (52). They encourage the surviving filibusters to die, like bishops exhorting their parishioners to worship (52). The floor of a ruined church in chapter V lies “heaped with the scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who’d barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen” (52, 55). This church failed to protect its congregants; if anything, the confines of the church made the process of scalping and scavenging easier. The eucharistic ceremony has been perverted: the worshippers’ “communal blood” has been “set up

103. Plotinus attacks this omission: “They say only, ‘Look to God!,’ but they do not tell anyone *where* or *how* to look” (Pagles loc. 2928). The Gnostic Allogenes argues that men can only come to the edge of gnosis but can never truly understand God: “[whoever] would say that he is something like gnosis, has sinned against him ... because he did not know God” (Meyer 581).

into a sort of pudding” for the consumption “of wolves or dogs” (55). Human bodies both devolve into meat and become elevated to a Christ-like position; they are sacraments to war. In the same chapter, vultures sit “among the niches in the carved facade hard by the figures of Christ and the apostles, the birds holding out their own dark vestments in postures of strange benevolence while about them flapped on the wind the dried scalps of slaughtered indians strung on cords” (65). Unlike previous examples, this house of worship remains standing, but the scalps suggest the cathedral survives because of its complicity with state-sanctioned genocide. The cathedral’s carvings of Christ and his apostles have lost their original meaning. They are now just things vultures sit on. Another ruined church in chapter VII has mud walls “rainwashed and lumpy and sloughing into a soft decay”: a house of God is literally and figuratively losing its structure (90). A foolhardy priest in chapter XIV comes “bearing before him the crucified Christ and exhorting [the scalp hunters] with fragments of latin in a singsong chant. This man was drubbed in the street and prodded obscenely and they flung gold coins at him as he lay clutching his image” (186). The priest cowers powerlessly before the scalp hunters. But he remains greedy or desperate enough to demand scavenging children bring him their coins. The ruined church in chapter XVI holds a dead imbecile lying in the sacristy, the priest’s chambers. A vulture in Chapter XIX stands on a headless corpse while wearing “clerical black” (257). *Blood Meridian* never depicts the church or its clergy in ways which assign them goodness, vitality or wisdom.

Secular institutions in the Mexican borderlands appear as fraught and fraudulent as their religious counterparts. *Blood Meridian* most often represents the secular social order through military officers. Like the scalp hunters and the Comanche, violence is their “trade” (246). But unlike those scalp hunters and Comanche, these officers are impotent. Captain White is a “fool” (64). The bulk of his filibusters die from illness; most of the remaining die in their first encounter with Comanche. Mexican soldiers capture or execute the rest. During the judge’s genealogical disquisition on black Jackson, “the authority” of the words delivered to Sergeant Aguilar “transcends his ignorance of their meaning” (78). The judge’s words prove entirely false: his references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, and the climate’s effect on racial traits are all disproven myths, but Aguilar is too ignorant to know. During the ball in Chihuahua, Governor Trias cannot pacify the rioting scalp hunters; he “was much like the sorcerer’s apprentice who could indeed provoke the imp to do his will but could in no way make him cease again” (166). Mr. Riddle, American consul to Chihuahua, likewise remains impotent, as he “descended to remonstrate with the revelers and was warned away” (166). By welcoming the scalp hunters into Chihuahua and paying for their scalps, Trias and Riddle’s solution for the Apache causes as much harm as the Apache themselves. In Tucson, Lieutenant Coutts cannot arrest Jackson in the obvious murder of Owens (233). Like Sergeant Aguilar, Coutts is enthralled by the judge’s scholarly chatter: “The judge translated for him latin terms of jurisprudence. He cited cases civil and martial. He quoted Coke and Blackstone, Anaximander, Thales” (236). Neither can the sergeant of the guard in San Diego punish David Brown for threatening a farrier, and Glanton beats the sergeant senseless in a later drunken confrontation (261, 264). A handful of outlaws prove too much for a governor of Chihuahua to control or a garrison of soldiers to confront. Such abject weakness serves McCarthy’s interest in demeaning secular institutions and takes precedence over historical accuracy or literary realism. In other words, McCarthy is so invested in critiquing secular and religious institutions that he will abandon historical accuracy and literary realism to do so.

But when the scalp hunters kill, or the Comanche run roughshod over the filibusterers, the power absent in secular and religious institutions reappears in the novel. In chapter X, the scalp hunters slaughter pursuing Apache without losing a single man (130). In chapter XII, the scalp

hunters attack one thousand Gileños and lose only one man (149). In chapter XIII, the scalp hunters kill an entire barroom of patrons and lose only one man (175). These implausible, perhaps impossible outcomes look remarkably like signs of divine intervention. They encourage readers to believe the judge's oration on war is right, that a "larger will" exists beyond church and state whose "truest divination" is mortal violence. McCarthy's scalp hunters and Comanche share an oppositional rhetoric of violence against and beyond the limits of Western society and the institutions which govern it. They dress in human skins and teeth, in the pilfered clothes of corpses, or in nothing at all. They decorate trees with dead babies, cut the bottoms off feet, and collect young girls for sexual slavery. These assignations of barbarism signify the scalp hunters' and Comanches' hierarchical dominance: they stand over society (figuratively) because they stand outside of society.

These horrific images provoke a deep sense of dystopian paranoia, a sense of something profoundly wrong with the fabric of civilization. Who or what we blame for this wrong depends partially upon the reader's interpretation. *Blood Meridian* depicts a great deal of obscene violence, but other than the judge's orations, the reader never receives a satisfactory explanation for why this violence happens. We know that the Catholic Church has failed to bring order to the Mexican-American borderlands, but we never learn why. We bring our own personal experiences and cultural knowledge to the text to assign blame, which is why Halloway and myself suspect academics so often interpret *Blood Meridian* as anti-Western or anti-Reaganism. The novel's wealth of religious imagery emphasizes, but does not clarify, these assignations. Kate Montague argues that *Blood Meridian*'s "excessive enumeration of references—to the bible, to ancient mythology, to Gnosticism and nihilism—feel illusory precisely because of the combinatorial excess; and so, precisely because of their congruence, the individual myths cancel one another out and so meaning is pushed to a point of meaninglessness" (Montague loc. 2478). Montague claims that *Blood Meridian* borrows from so many different theological traditions that each individual tradition, and the larger message of the novel, ultimately loses its meaning. I would extend Montague's claim to the novel's historical and literary references. The more one researches, the more one feels lost, standing "darkened and dumb" at that "void without terminus or origin" (301). Making sense of the novel feels just as impossible as making sense of the judge. But through an agnotological reading, meaninglessness is not necessarily a lack of meaning. Meaninglessness can also convey the opposite: a meaning so powerful, godlike and all-encompassing that the receiver is incapable of understanding it. Meaninglessness can be a rhetorical strategy that opposes more coherent, established rhetoric. We often label this meaningless rhetoric pretentious or sophistic—and it is—but when done well enough, it transforms willful ignorance into divine truth. When McCarthy draws from an excess of traditions to decorate his narrative, when his references blur together to the point of meaninglessness, this excessive blurring does not indicate that McCarthy is a nihilist, that he intends *Blood Meridian* to prove the utter futility of making any sense of the world. Rather, he is assigning his hodgepodge of references the status of divine wisdom. He weaves a bricolage of disparate and often contradictory elements that together form some sort of larger truth about the world. Of course, a more common word for this sort of rhetoric is bullshitting. But the lack of clarity and coherence does not mar the novel's aesthetic value; rather, the opaqueness and incoherence are what make the novel valuable. Through this rhetoric, the novel asserts an otherworldly authority against clearer, more coherent institutional knowledge.

Conclusion

While I do not claim to know what *Blood Meridian* is “really” about, my suspicion is that McCarthy occupies the same position as Sheriff Bell, the protagonist of McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* (2005): an aging, white, Christian, small-town everyman and amateur philosopher who views himself in contention with both liberal and conservative cultural institutions. Based on his stated pessimism towards human nature and social change, and on the dystopic settings and immoral characters that populate his novels, I suspect that McCarthy holds a natural antipathy towards the progressivist leanings of America’s liberal arts programs. I suspect that *Blood Meridian*’s violence is inspired more by McCarthy’s spectatorship of mid-twentieth-century Tennessee than by the history of the American Southwest: the Columbia race riots of 1946, the Clinton race riots of 1957 and the Chattanooga race riots of 1960; the Nashville school bombing of 1957 and the Clinton school bombing of 1958; and the bombing of civil rights leader Z. Alexander Looby’s home in 1960, and the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968.¹⁰⁴ *Blood Meridian* is more of a Tennessee novel than it appears: along with the kid, who is based on Samuel Chamberlain’s memoir *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* (1850), eight of the historical figures in *Blood Meridian* (Reverend Green, Governor Burnett, John Glanton, Doctor Lincoln, Ben McCulloch, Lieutenant Coutts, General Patterson and Sarah Borginnis) are from Tennessee (Sepich loc. 1479, Note 16). Like the Comanche, these Tennesseans migrated south into Texas and Mexico, bringing a culture of violence and slavery along with them. Their prowess at warfare, according to historian Daniel Rasmussen, was the result of their homeland’s “fear of slave insurrection by ‘negro assassins’” like Virginia’s Nat Turner and Louisiana’s Kook and Quamana (181). In this sense, the violence of *Blood Meridian* originates on the slave plantations of McCarthy’s home state, rather than from some gnostic demiurge or larger will the judge speaks into existence. But I cannot prove what inspired *Blood Meridian*’s violence, because McCarthy has been relatively silent about himself and his work. Now at the ripe old age of eighty-five, I do not expect his public silence to suddenly change.

Towards the end of the novel, in one of *Blood Meridian*’s most difficult and obscure passages, we receive an explanation of what the judge actually judges. In the midst of a jailhouse dream, the kid sees the judge with a farrier (a blacksmith) beside him:

The judge enshadowed [the farrier] where he crouched at his trade but he was a coldforger who worked with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men’s fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end. (302)

The farrier suggestively resembles a writer, and his “hammer and die” remind us of the hammers and ink of a typewriter (with “die” as a play on “dye”). The crouched-over “coldforger” in “exile from men’s fires” evokes the solitary writer at work. The “residual specie” represent the mythologies and traditions the writer uses to construct his new ideas, which he hopes will have

104. Growing up in the wealthier sections of Knoxville and attending the University of Tennessee’s all-white undergraduate program, McCarthy would have been relatively safe from racial violence, but surely it was a topic of serious discussion: in a 1958 poll of white Knoxvilleans, all 167 respondents were against white children enrolling in black schools, 72% were against black children enrolling in white schools, and 85% “disputed that the Brown [v. Board of Education] decision was legally the law of the land” (Graham 137).

value “in the markets where men barter.” In other words, this coinage represents epistemological currency. But the judge judges the writer’s work unfavorably, and the new “dawn” which the writer hopes to herald never comes. Here the narrator perhaps refers to the writers of *Blood Meridian*’s time, those mid-nineteenth-century optimists lionized by influential critic Lewis Mumford in *The Golden Day* (1926). Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that America “is a country of beginnings, of projects, of vast designs and expectations. It has no past: all has an onward and prospective look” (492). Writers like Herman Melville, one of McCarthy’s favorites, who wrote in his early novel *White-Jacket* (1850) that America was “the Israel of our time,” and that “We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things. In our youth is our strength; in our inexperience our wisdom” (239). This optimism, according to Mumford, “shows what the pioneer movement might have come to if this great migration had sought culture rather than material conquest, and an intensity of life, rather than mere extension over the continent” (loc. 1022). But I can only speculate as to what this late, obscure passage in *Blood Meridian* actually means. Other scholars have produced dramatically different and equally valid interpretations. This ambiguity constitutes the beauty of *Blood Meridian*: in its obscure lyricism, excessive references and beautiful violence, it becomes a pleasurable authority adaptive to multiple interpretations.

CHAPTER 4.

THE FAMILY AND THE BODY POLITIC: RACIAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*

The much-anticipated release of Ken Levine's *BioShock Infinite* (2013), spiritual successor to the original *BioShock* (2007), was met with near-universal critical acclaim. *The New York Times*'s Chris Suellentrop called it "confirmation that in the hands of the right creators, video games are the most sophisticated form of not just interactive entertainment, but of multimedia storytelling as well." *The Guardian*'s Nick Cowen found in *Infinite*, "the sort of high-minded philosophical territory that could fuel a dozen or so PhD dissertations" and wrote, "the only sensible review of this game would be to instruct the reader to close this window, order a copy of the game and play it. It really is that good." *The Telegraph*'s Tom Hoggins labeled *Infinite* "a brilliant canvas of world-building and characterization that is arguably peerless in this youthful industry."¹⁰⁵ According to review aggregator *Metacritic*, *Infinite* was the highest-rated PC game of 2013; all sixty-eight reviews were "Positive," and twenty-five were perfect scores ("Bioshock"). *Infinite* went on to sell over eleven million units, and its success helped Ken Levine receive the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award from the Golden Joysticks, essentially the Oscars of videogames (Booker).

But in the months and years after *Infinite*'s March release, dissenting voices began to emerge. In June of 2013, NYU professor Robert Yang blogged that *Infinite* was "a profound failure in storytelling" and "a game with Ambitions of Meaning which ... it didn't earn at all and never had a chance of earning." University of Waterloo professor Gerald Vorhees argued in 2016 that *Infinite*'s father-daughter narrative "re-entrenches the most pathological and misogynist elements of patriarchal domination," and one year later York University's Sarah Stang agreed, citing *Infinite*'s "extremely unhealthy father-daughter relationship" (Stang 164). In short, as academia intervened and a smattering of critics changed their minds, *Infinite*'s cultural legacy now feels more uncertain.¹⁰⁶

Why such delayed, divergent interpretations of *Infinite*? Part of it may be the problematic relationship between videogame reviewers and videogame developers, the unspoken exchange of favorable coverage for early and exclusive access to special content. Part of it is the homogeneity between the two groups, who largely share the same basic perspectives on race, masculinity, and fatherhood (Lane is the only white male among the dissenters listed above).¹⁰⁷ And part of it is

105. *Game Informer*'s Joe Juba: "Among the best games I've played." *Joystiq*'s Xav de Matos: "*BioShock Infinite* is one of the best told stories of this generation. It simply cannot be missed." *Destructoid*'s Jim Sterling: "Damn near perfect." *Vandal's* Jorge Cano: "one of the masterpieces of the genre." *Toronto Sun*'s Steve Tilley: "the most memorable video game I've played in a very long time." *Polygon*'s Arthur Gies: "it was all I could do to navigate the final twenty minutes in stunned silence, which followed me through the credits and for the rest of the night. I'm still thinking about *BioShock Infinite* now, days after playing."

106. *Eurogamer*'s Rick Lane, whose original review called *Infinite* "the pinnacle of what the mainstream FPS [first-person shooter] can offer," decided three years later that it was "gaming's loftiest and most spectacular folly," partially because of its "astoundingly asinine assertion" that racist and anti-racist violence were morally equivalent: "to tar racism and revolution with the same brush and then dismiss the entire topic? That isn't just oversimplification, that's verging on cowardice."

107. According to the International Game Developers Association 2014 report, game developers are 79% white, 76% male, and 86% heterosexual ("Developer"). Only 23% of minority developers felt there was equal treatment in the workplace. 70% of developers are between ages 25-40, 60% have a bachelor's degree or higher, and

the slow pace at which academia enters the conversation. But subsequent real-world events have also changed how and why we think about *Infinite*'s racialized and sexualized violence, none more so than the rise of Donald Trump (Levine has since compared him to *Infinite*'s fascist antagonist) (Suellentrop). *Infinite* is worth returning to for more than scholarly reflection: the game feels closer than ever to the future of American politics, one that is increasingly divided by race and gender and increasingly prone to literal and rhetorical violence.

In what follows, I argue that *Infinite* is a game against politics, one that uses strategically chosen villains based on anachronistic political figures to threaten its father and daughter pair. I provide a close reading of three scenes—the raffle, Fitzroy's murder, and Elizabeth's torture—to show how *Infinite*'s racialized and sexualized violence serve as motivational tools for the white father's emotional maturation and the white daughter's physical maturation. While the violence of black revolutionary Daisy Fitzroy has received criticism from fans and scholars alike, I argue that the same problems can be found in the violence of Father Comstock, the game's fundamentalist Christian villain. The specters of 1970s black militancy and nineteenth-century Mormonism are resurrected as easily identifiable corruptors of a white daughter's purity.¹⁰⁸ *Infinite*'s thematic conflict between politics and family turns familial love into an overtly apolitical ideal. But by incorporating extreme left/right political movements led by childless, child-harming villains, *Infinite* privileges mainstream, middle-class American liberalism as the sole proprietor of family values. The overtly apolitical becomes the covertly political.

UC Riverside's Daniel Ante-Contreras argued that the original *BioShock* used Rapture, a fantastical undersea dystopia built on Randian¹⁰⁹ principles of self-interest, as an allegory for

50% make \$50,000 or more a year. There is no formal research on the demographics of game critics, but an informal study shared by *The Guardian*'s Games Editor Keza MacDonald found that 75% of game reviews were written by men. Rosie Maria, a games journalist for *Video Game Choo Choo* offered a similar account: "Mainstream gaming journalism has long had a reputation as a 'boy's club,' and if you looked at the writers for nearly every *God of War* review you could soon understand why. When I panned through the 40 or so reviews available upon the lift of the embargo, I noticed a nigh complete lack of writers that didn't fit into a specific mold: A man in his late 20s to late 30s, who makes an allusion to being a father."

108. Scholar Martha Rhodes explains that "white anxiety about sex between white women and black men is not a timeless phenomenon," but rather a product of the postbellum South, one which continued through the 1967 repeal of anti-miscegenation laws in *Loving v. Virginia* (2). The linkage of black radicalism with illicit black/white sexual contact appeared in prominent literature of late 1960s and early 1970s, including the budding romance between Nat and Margaret in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967); Eldridge Cleaver's poem "To a White Girl" in *Soul on Ice* (1968); and the hypersexualized miscegenation in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). In the second half of the nineteenth century, according to historian Patrick Q. Mason, anti-Mormonism was a "truly national phenomenon" because of Mormon polygamy: "Anxious rhetoric about the Mormon seducer paralleled in many ways the contemporary hyperbolic fear that southern white men displayed toward the mythical 'black beast rapist'" (12, 15). The LDS church was called a "society for the seduction of young virgins," and Salt Lake City "the biggest whorehouse in the world" (Mason 7). Anti-Mormons framed their violent rhetoric and vigilantism as a defense against the corrupting powers of polygamy on young white women.

109. Ayn Rand's Objectivism, according to Randian philosopher Leonard Peikoff, lionizes the independent man who "does not need others; he acts among them just as he would without them. In principle, he is as alone in society as on a desert island" (252-253). Objectivism links material independence with intellectual independence to argue that selfishness is a necessary means for individual creativity and wisdom. The character Roark in Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) categorizes individualists and collectivists as "creators" and "parasites": "The creator lives for his work. He needs no other men. His primary goal is within himself. The parasite lives second-hand. He needs others. Others become his prime motive" (681). The parasitic label applies to anyone dependent on others for self-worth: the altruist, the religious devotee, the impoverished, the criminal, the company man, etc.

young white male paranoia. Standing at the precipice of adulthood and uncertain of whether to “buy in” to the American economy (by going to college, starting a career and raising a family) or “drop out” and embrace a proletariat resistance, these young men worried that both establishment and anti-establishment voices were lying to them, and that either choice would force them to become puppets for someone else’s ambitions. *BioShock* connected with young, white male gamers by making them the estranged son of antagonist Andrew Ryan, the creator and ruler of Rapture, and the symbolic brother to Rapture’s Little Sisters, ghoulish young girls filled with valuable genetic material. *Infinite* continued these familial tropes by making its protagonist a father, an alternate version of *Infinite*’s antagonist from another universe. *Infinite* participated in what *Kotaku*’s editor-in-chief Stephen Totilo dubbed the “daddening” of videogames over the last decade: narratives that center on fatherly protagonists rescuing their daughterly companions, an evolution of the clichéd damsel-in-distress game narrative.

BioShock’s most-discussed feature was the player choice to either murder Little Sisters for their genetic material, thereby making your character more powerful, or to rescue them and forego the reward. In *Infinite*, all player choices are all conspicuously meaningless: you are resigned to the role of father-protectorate, and the narrative will never change, no matter how many interdimensional jumps you make through *Infinite*’s complicated multiverse. *Infinite* provides a metacommentary on the stagnant nature of narrative design within videogames, but also a disturbing, “anti-revolutionary” interpretation of American history: an endless, unchangeable cycle of oppressors and oppressed (Thompson). The difficulty in deconstructing *Infinite* lies in deciding which ludic elements are a metacommentary on videogames and which are a commentary on politics. I believe Levine is deeply cynical about both.

The fictional worlds of videogames are often described through Johan Huizinga’s theory of the play-ground or magic circle developed in *Homo Ludens* (1938). Huizinga describes the play-ground as a sacred space governed by distinct rules which may or may not apply in the real world. Huizinga writes: “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (10). The hallowed space of the play-ground allows for ritualized performances that can critique and shape the ordinary world by virtue of the play-ground’s special rules. We can say and do things in the play-ground that the ordinary world prohibits. In *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (2007), Edward Castronova uses the term “membrane” rather than “magic circle” to emphasize the transmission of ideas between these two spaces (loc. 2301). Just because we can shoot fireballs and pilot spaceships does not mean that our play-grounds are divorced from the politics and problems of our ordinary lives. Through obscene violence, sexualized imagery, and racial and gendered stereotypes, many videogames have cultivated play-grounds that appeal to white male consumers by disturbing the larger populace. The intimacy of these videogames rests in their ability to alienate non-players. After decades of criticism by politicians, academics and mainstream media outlets, many white male players view themselves as an oppressed minority, a marginalized group under threat from larger institutional forces. Levine, an avowed liberal and member of the Jewish diaspora, would presumably disavow these players. And *Infinite*’s dystopian setting serves to criticize white nationalism and Tea Party patriotism, the sort of political ideologies these disaffected players often support. But in criticizing these ideologies, *Infinite* remains committed to representing the thoughts and anxieties of white male gamers. *Infinite*’s problematic depictions of racial and sexual violence, and its metatextual commentary on the stagnant nature of

videogame design, belie a studio of white male videogame developers focused on representing and catering to people like themselves.

The secondary antagonist of the original *BioShock*, Frank Fontaine, deceived the player by pretending to be Atlas, a good-natured Irish father trying to rescue his family. By the game's end, Atlas/Fontaine is revealed to be a Teamster-like importer who organized Rapture's working class in a selfish ploy for power. The character's abrupt shift from an Irish brogue to a vaguely Italian Bronx accent reflected an ethnically coded conception of "good" and "bad" white immigrant populations rooted in post-Kennedy, post-*Godfather* American culture.¹¹⁰ *Infinite*'s Daisy Fitzroy is the spiritual successor to this antagonist, but without the con artistry. Her transition from revolutionary leader to savage murderer of children is represented as this black female character's natural progression. If the first installment of *BioShock* allegorized youthful white male paranoia, *Infinite* allegorizes paternal white male phobia of radical political change. Racial and economic justice becomes a dangerous threat to the "normal" white American family. Perhaps as a response to criticism of Fitzroy's portrayal, Levine used *Infinite*'s expansion packs to retcon Fitzroy's intentions for her child-victim, but the new information offered (discussed in detail further below) cements the way gender, race, and the nuclear family are interwoven in modern narratives of racial violence. *BioShock Infinite* represents a problem facing the next decade of videogame development: as creators answer the call for more diverse characters and more "serious" storylines, will they continue to lean heavily on entrenched narratives of racial conflict told from and for white, middle-class male gamers? I ultimately argue that *Infinite*'s conclusion offers the best advice for the game industry: kill off the protagonist, erase the narrative, and embrace the growing trend towards multiplayer communities and social, non-narratological gaming. Allow gamers, a far more diverse group than developers and reviewers, to make their own stories through communal play.

***Infinite*: A Brief Introduction**

BioShock Infinite takes place in the floating city of Columbia in the year 1912. The player is led to believe the narrative revolves around a private investigator, Booker DeWitt, settling a gambling debt by kidnapping a girl. The girl turns out to be Elizabeth, the daughter of Columbia's founder, Father Comstock. Elizabeth can open Tears, rifts in the fabric of space-time which allow Elizabeth to enter into and pull things out of parallel universes. Elizabeth describes it as a sort of "wish fulfillment." If a bee is bothering her, Elizabeth can open a Tear into a sunny field and let the bee fly through. If someone important to her dies, Elizabeth can open a Tear into a universe where that person is still alive. Tears allow access to the "multiverse"—a seemingly infinite number of universes in which some events are constant (they always happen) and some events are variable.

110. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995) traces the Irish's enfoldment into white American culture during the debates over slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. Prominent Irishmen long supported abolitionism and identified slavery's injustices with the treatment afforded the Irish by Britain. But as the debate intensified, pro-slavery Southerners who contributed to the Irish national cause threatened to withhold support, and Irish American laborers in northern cities feared competition for work from newly freed blacks. The Irish and Irish Americans abandoned abolitionism to further their own cause, thus beginning their transition into the ranks of the white race. Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) argues that this Irish transition was completed after the success of John F. Kennedy: "That John F. Kennedy had attained the presidency [...] seemed to settle once and for all the question of the ethnics' 'fitness for self-government.' Their whiteness had been ratified by popular vote" (loc. 5975).

A great deal of backstory exists, most of which is not explained until the game's ending: Booker DeWitt and Father Comstock are the same person. Elizabeth is technically Booker's daughter, not Comstock's. In 1890, at the age of sixteen, Booker participated in the Lakota massacre at Wounded Knee. His guilt over Wounded Knee's violence led him to a baptism ceremony. Booker's decision to be baptized is a variable. In every universe in which he accepted the baptism, he evolved into Father Comstock, and in every universe where he rejected the baptism, he became a debt-ridden private investigator and single parent. In 1894, Booker was approached by agents of Father Comstock—agents from another universe—who pay off his gambling debts in exchange for his child. Comstock had become impotent, and Comstock wanted an heir. Roughly eighteen years later, in 1912, those now-repentant agents returned to Booker and asked him to rescue Elizabeth. But traveling through a Tear to Comstock's universe alters his memory, and when the game begins, Booker simply thinks he is a private investigator tasked with a job. Technically, he is the 123rd Booker in the 123rd version of Columbia: Comstock's agents have tried and failed at this redemptive plan 122 times prior.

Comstock's floating city of Columbia was originally designed for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition; it is *Infinite's* version of Chicago's White City.¹¹¹ Comstock has built Columbia into a white supremacist, authoritarian Christian theocracy, and his ability to open Tears into other times and places established him as a prophet of future events. Black convicts and poor immigrants have been shuttled up to work as forced laborers. If the pristine sections of Columbia look like the White City, the laborers' living conditions look like the slums of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1904), a protest novel about Chicago's southside meatpacking industry.¹¹² But one of those black convicts, Daisy Fitzroy, has started a resistance movement known as the Vox Populi among Columbia's workers.¹¹³ Booker allies himself with Fitzroy and the Vox in order to rescue Elizabeth from Columbia. And during their escape, in the game's most controversial scene, Elizabeth kills Fitzroy to prevent her from murdering a child, the son of a wealthy industrialist, Jeremiah Fink.

***Infinite's* Metaphorical Menarche: Racial Violence as Character Development**

In the lead up to this murder, Booker and Elizabeth entered a Tear into a new universe, a new Columbia where a bloodthirsty Fitzroy has almost triumphed, and another Booker has already

111. Like Columbia, the White City stood as a testament to Western industrialism and civic planning but came at a significant cost to the common man. Historian Erik Larson laments in *The Devil in the White City* (2003) that "scores of workers had been hurt or killed in building the dream, their families consigned to poverty. Fire had killed fifteen more" (5). Upon completion, the ten thousand laborers responsible for its construction were left without employment or a social safety net in the slums of late nineteenth-century Chicago. Larson concludes: "The White City had drawn men and protected them; the Black City now welcomed them back, on the eve of winter, with filth, starvation, and violence" (323).

111. *The Jungle* follows the narrative of Jurgis, a Lithuanian immigrant and meatpacker. The conditions of the slaughterhouse are horrific: the lack of proper light and heat, combined with bloody floors, lead to grisly accidents. A predatory real estate agency sells Jurgis a slum tenement at an inflated price. A workplace injury causes him to lose his job. His relative turns to prostitution. His wife dies in childbirth. Jurgis cannot afford to heat his home or properly feed his family, all of whom die from malnutrition, food poisoning, exposure and other preventable injuries.

113. *Vox populi* is Latin for "the voice of the people."

died and been canonized as a Vox martyr. Fitzroy is not happy to see him again. Fitzroy's rejection of this new Booker helps to explain *Infinite*'s narratological rejection of this black female revolutionary: "My Booker DeWitt was a hero to the cause. A story to tell your children. You... you just complicate the narrative." Booker's utility to Fitzroy as an inspirational narrative of sacrifice is complete, and his continued existence only complicates the story she wants to tell her followers. In the same way, Fitzroy's utility as an inspirational narrative of black empowerment is complete, and her continued existence only complicates the story *Infinite* wants to tell its players. Because if Fitzroy continues to be a "good" revolutionary, then Booker can stop fighting. The Vox will win, peace and equality will come to Columbia, and Elizabeth will be safe. Fitzroy must turn evil so that Booker can keep killing. But Fitzroy's evil turn provides *Infinite* more than just a reason for more violence. *Infinite* stages Fitzroy's murder as Elizabeth's symbolic entrance into womanhood: as a mother-figure, as a sexual object for the player and as an adult daughter capable of fending for herself.

Elizabeth stabs Fitzroy in the back with a pair of fabric shears.¹¹⁴ By being covered with Fitzroy's blood, and subsequently needing to change into a much more revealing outfit, Elizabeth goes through a metaphorical menarche, a transformation into a sexualized body. While the idea of murder as a metaphorical menarche may sound ridiculous, Levine's retconning of the scene confirms this reading (more on this momentarily). And Fitzroy's murder comes after an earlier reference to menarche: Elizabeth's used menstrual pad from age thirteen, with "menarche" written underneath, is part of a scientific exhibit in Elizabeth's prison. This is perhaps the first reference to menstruation in a major studio videogame that was not a "time of the month" joke.

Because *Infinite* needs villains to threaten its familial pair, Levine makes Fitzroy, the game's only black female character, as evil and sadistic as Comstock. Booker and Elizabeth's dialogue repeatedly reminds you of the parallel between Fitzroy and Comstock. Booker and Elizabeth say that "the only difference between Comstock and Fitzroy is how you spell the name"; that Fitzroy and Comstock "are just right for each other"; and that "Fitzroy's no better than Comstock."¹¹⁵ Of course, revolutionary governments often repeat the same injustices and abuses as the regimes they replace.¹¹⁶ But having Fitzroy's first action upon turning the tide of the rebellion be the attempted murder of a child, especially considering the dearth of black female characters in videogames and the dearth of black characters in *Infinite*, makes Fitzroy feel more like a plot device than a character. Levine responded to criticism of Fitzroy's evil turn by saying that "as a student of history," he found that "oppression turns them [survivors] into oppressors" (Suellontrop). He views historical narratives the same way he views videogame narratives: as a

114. Elizabeth's shears—her first weapon, a functional tool, and an appropriate device for a person who opens Tears—are analogous to the first weapon a player receives in each of Levine's first-person shooters: a wrench. (The first weapon a player receives in *Infinite*, the Sky-Hook, is the wrench's spiritual successor; it was originally designed to look and work like a wrench.) There is presumably more to be written on the wrench in *BioShock*: how its function as a loosener and tightener fits *BioShock*'s themes of freedom and control; how the wrench evokes the most popular hero in videogame history, an Italian plumber; and how the wrench and fabric shears represent working-class professions populated by men and women, respectively.

115. The surname Fitzroy means "son of the king" in Anglo-Norman French. The name was taken by illegitimate children of British kings to indicate their parentage. Daisy's name symbolizes her metaphorical kinship to Father Comstock.

116. Consider the forced labor practices of Henri Christophe's Haiti in C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938), the labor camps of Castro's Cuba in Reinaldo Arenas's *Before Night Falls* (1992), the prevalence of slavery in post-Revolutionary America, or the mass-scale atrocities under Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot.

repetition of the same basic characters and conflicts, a cycle of violence and oppression that “just goes on and on and on” (Suellontrop). However, Levine retconned a new narrative for Fitzroy in *Infinite*’s second expansion pack, *Burial at Sea – Episode 2*. There, the player eavesdrops on an earlier conversation between Fitzroy and Comstock’s agents:

FITZROY: I’ve taken your counsel, and you done me good service. But I will not hurt the boy... I will see Fink [the wealthy industrialist] and Comstock burn, but I will not hold the son to account for the deeds of his father.

ROSALIND [Agent #1]: You’ve misunderstood us.

ROBERT [Agent #2]: We neither asked you to harm the child--

ROSALIND: --nor did we promise that yours would be the hand that would set Comstock’s world afire.

ROBERT: A famous man once said--

ROSALIND: And a famous man shall say--

ROBERT: --”I may reach the mountaintop...”

ROSALIND: “...but I fear I shall never visit the valley below.”

FITZROY: But...you mean I won’t live to see the-- ...No.

ROSALIND: It’s up to you what matters more.

ROBERT: Your part in the play--

ROSALIND: --or the play itself.

ROBERT: Someone is coming.

ROSALIND: She’ll arrive a girl.

ROBERT: She must leave a woman.

ROSALIND: And what makes the difference between a girl and a woman?

FITZROY: Blood.

In short, Fitzroy makes clear that she would never harm the child, but Comstock’s agents make clear that she must threaten him in order to compel Elizabeth to murder her. Levine misquotes Martin Luther King Jr.’s final speech to redeem Fitzroy’s actions, but the comparison rings hollow: King’s movement relied on non-violent resistance, and Fitzroy’s revolution is anything but. The comparison seems solely based on skin color. *Infinite* ends with Elizabeth going back in time to kill Booker at his baptism ceremony, ensuring that herself, Comstock and Columbia never exist. Which means all those black convicts and poor immigrants brought to Columbia simply stay black convicts and poor immigrants in America, living and working in the exploitative conditions that inspired *Infinite*’s story. These marginalized groups will not reach King’s proverbial valley through Fitzroy’s self-sacrifice. Even though the morality of Fitzroy’s attack on a child has been changed by Levine, the underlying reason remains the same: Fitzroy compels Elizabeth to kill so that Elizabeth can enter womanhood. Which is the second problem with this scene: *Infinite*’s racial violence primarily serves to further the familial narrative between the game’s two white protagonists. *Infinite* is not a game about politics or race; *Infinite* is a game against politics and race, in which the protagonist fights two political and racial ideologies which threaten his family. They threaten the very concept of family: what Comstock and Fitzroy share is their childlessness and their harm to the children of others. Pro-blackness and anti-blackness appear as two sides of the same coin in the larger narrative of familial reconciliation. If Fitzroy had remained noble, a rightful heir to the Founding Fathers’ revolutionary spirit, “a hero to the cause” and “a story to tell your children,” then Elizabeth could leave Columbia voluntarily, or she could stay and help Fitzroy rebuild society. But neither outcome requires Booker’s reintroduction to her life. A cross-racial partnership between these two women would render Booker’s violence unwanted and unneeded.

While *Infinite's* discussion of racism and economic exploitation deserve praise, Levine ultimately abandons these topics to privilege his white family's familial reconciliation.

(Black) Damsel in Distress: Racist Imagery as a Motivational Tool

A similar problem takes place in the game's opening scene of racial violence. Upon arriving at Columbia, the player encounters a carnival whose main event is a mysterious raffle. Every raffle ticket is a baseball with a number, and your prize for winning is the first throw. In "Race and the First-Person Shooter," Diana Adesola Mafe recounts the scene:

The red curtain behind the emcee slowly lifts, and an interracial couple, a white man and a black woman, are propelled to the front of the stage with their hands tied behind them. The crowd begins to hum "Here Comes the Bride," and racist props — jungle foliage, a wedding party of grinning monkeys, and a grass-skirted officiant — surround the couple, who beg for mercy. The emcee turns to you expectantly and points to the baseball in your hand: "Come on! Are you gonna throw it? Or are you taking your coffee black these days?" He laughs maniacally at his own joke. The sinister implications of the scene are now evident. The seemingly down-home raffle is a masquerade for a lynch mob, and the innocuous baseballs, symbols of a favorite American pastime, are the execution tools. A timer appears in the middle of the on-screen image, indicating that you will have to decide soon. The first button will throw the baseball at the couple. The second button will throw the baseball at the announcer. The choice is yours. (89-90)

The choice is illusory: before Booker can throw, a police officer grabs his arm and identifies him as an interloper. Rather than require the player to make a moral choice with consequences, the raffle scene negates moral questions because its barbarity ensures all subsequent violent gameplay feels justified. The raffle allows us to kill without remorse. After being discovered by the police, Booker guides an officer's face into another officer's spinning Sky-Hook (a motorized, three-pronged device worn on the hand). Booker picks up the Sky-Hook and the player's melee combat begins. They use the gruesome device to snap necks and grind scalps. The player never returns to the racist imagery to learn about its meaning or historical significance, and the unnamed interracial couple only make a brief follow-up appearance.¹¹⁷ The racist imagery employs the history of black suffering to justify the player's subsequent violence. The interracial couple are, in this sense, another videogame damsel in distress.

Kotaku's Kirk Hamilton and *Polygon's* Chris Plante, among others, have focused on the raffle scene in a larger critique of *Infinite's* violent gameplay. They complain that *Infinite's* obscene violence detracts from its narrative and prevents it from reaching a wider audience. While I agree that obscene violence limits a text's potential audience, I disagree that obscene violence detracts from *Infinite's* narrative. On the contrary, the narrative detracts from the violence. My counterargument to Plante requires additional examples. Murdering prostitutes in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is arguably more disturbing and has received far more criticism than *Infinite's* violence, despite being cartoonish and far less bloody. *Grand Theft Auto's* prostitutes have real-life counterparts who are frequent targets of real violence. The protagonist—the avatar through which the player commits this violence—is a stereotype of a violent black male. And the underlying justification for the player to murder prostitutes is to make money to buy weapons and cars. In short, the narrative decisions and real-world parallels that accompany videogame violence

117. Whichever character is not thrown at later offers the player a helpful item, but the item is the same regardless.

have a more disorienting effect than the amount of blood shown to the player. Compare *Infinite* to the most iconic damsel-in-distress narrative in videogames, *Super Mario Bros.* Imagine if the player of *Super Mario Bros.* was led to understand that Princess Peach was being sexually assaulted by Bowser. Rape is presumably why villains kidnap damsels. If Nintendo used such a traumatic event as an explicit justification for the game's ludic play, that play would become profoundly disturbing, even though the violence of *Super Mario Bros.* consists of jumping on the heads of Koopas and Goombas. Exploiting images of racist violence simply to justify *Infinite*'s violent gameplay suggests that Levine is catering exclusively to white male gamers.

Sexual Violence as a Father-Daughter Moment: Comstock's Torture Device

The goal of Booker's journey—even if he cannot remember it—is to be a good father, to rescue his daughter from the situation caused by his abandonment. Elizabeth's guilt after the murder of Fitzroy becomes a moment for Booker to offer parental guidance, even if on the first playthrough the player does not realize it. Booker tells Elizabeth, "I know how this feels... Look, I've been there. You don't [forget]... You just learn to live with it." *Infinite* emphasizes this father-daughter moment by mixing Elizabeth's guilt over murdering Fitzroy with Elizabeth's guilt over being seen by Booker in a low-cut dress: she looks down, avoiding his gaze, shifting her feet and crossing her arm over her waist. "This is all they had," Elizabeth says shamefully.¹¹⁸ Booker's awkward confrontation with Elizabeth's sexuality continues during a later scene where Elizabeth is captured and tortured by Comstock's doctors. In what appears to be a symbolic rape, Elizabeth writhes in pain on an operating table, her arms restrained, her corset undone, a large, phallic-shaped instrument inserted in her back. The instrument is both for punishment and, quite literally, for power—Elizabeth's pain gets siphoned into a machine (appropriately called a Siphon) which fuels Columbia's futuristic technology. As the player fights through enemies to reach the Siphon's controls, they can hear Elizabeth's screams for mercy. "Do you hear that screaming, DeWitt?" Comstock says over the PA. "That is the sound of your interference. You have led my daughter into temptation!" There is a lot of information to unpack here, and additional explanation is helpful. Elizabeth's pain emits energy, the same energy which allows her to open Tears into other worlds. Elizabeth repeatedly describes her Tears as a form of wish fulfillment. She believes the universes Booker and herself enter are partially of her own design. Booker and Elizabeth entered a Tear into a universe where the Vox were winning because Elizabeth (foolishly, the game tells us) wanted the Vox to succeed. The vengeful, hate-filled ghost of Lady Comstock emerged from a Tear because that is how Elizabeth imagined Lady Comstock would act. In this sense, Elizabeth's power is imagination: she can open a Tear to any place or situation her mind can imagine. And like conventional ideas about imagination, Elizabeth's power was much stronger when she was a small child, before Comstock started siphoning her energy. The tower built for Elizabeth's imprisonment served as a giant capacitor, and its Siphons worked covertly to drain her imagination. Think of the tower's Siphons like hegemonic masculinity, invisibly draining Elizabeth's imaginative capabilities and keeping her trapped inside. Elizabeth's power to imagine worlds was hindered so

118. The strange context here—and I do not know what to make of it—is that Elizabeth is wearing the dress of Lady Comstock, who is this universe's version of her mother. It is necessary for a minor plot development later in the narrative, and it does not make logical sense that the pious Lady Comstock would keep such a lowcut dress. But the notion that Elizabeth's symbolic entrance into womanhood involves putting on her mother's dress and bearing her sexualized body before her father seems important, somehow.

that Comstock could build his world, which is *Infinite*'s feminist critique of male authorship and patriarchal societies.¹¹⁹ The sexual imagery of Comstock's penetrative torture device equates the stifling and exploiting of Elizabeth's imagination with the physical act of rape. Because she left her tower and entered womanhood, Elizabeth now requires a more oppressive, medicalized form of punishment. And while Comstock continues to punish Elizabeth, he still denies her agency by blaming the decision on Booker. Like a fallen woman, Elizabeth was "led... into temptation" by a roguish male interloper.

Booker turns off the Siphon and Elizabeth, her mind liberated, opens a Tear into Kansas and brings a tornado to kill Comstock's doctors. She is strapped to the table with her elbows pinned back, her bolero jacket removed, and her corset undone, the same sort of sexualized depiction that accompanied Booker's last stab at parenting, the metaphorical menarche. Booker helps Elizabeth up, and the player participates by entering commands with the F key:

[F] FREE ELIZABETH

BOOKER: I've got you. It's okay. Okay, I'm gonna fix this. You ready? Here...

ELIZABETH: Just do it.

Booker removes the penetrative instrument and reties Elizabeth's corset through the commands [F] HELP ELIZABETH and [F] TIE CORSET.¹²⁰ (Assumedly, this moment represents the first videogame wherein corset tying is a gameplay mechanic.) Although she asks for this help, both actions cause Elizabeth significant pain. Scratches, scrapes, and the bruised wound from Comstock's instrument are visible on Elizabeth's back, so as a player, this additional pain feels unheroic compared to *Infinite*'s typical shooting and slashing gameplay. Comstock's Siphons were designed to restrict Elizabeth's imagination, and Comstock's torture device enhanced the Siphon's capabilities by inflicting pain on Elizabeth's body. This painful retying of her corset—a restrictive device designed to mold women's bodies into an ideal shape—shows Booker and the player mirroring Comstock's behavior, albeit at her request. This scene points to Booker's limitations as a father and Elizabeth's growing independence as a daughter. Having conjured a tornado, Elizabeth is clearly more powerful than her father, and her willingness to retie the corset shows endurance, not capitulation. In the subsequent dialogue, Booker wants to leave Columbia, while Elizabeth is not finished:

BOOKER: We're gonna find an airship and we'll leave...

ELIZABETH: Booker.

BOOKER: Paris. Elizabeth, remember... you wanted to go to—

ELIZABETH: We're not leaving. We are going to find Comstock.

BOOKER: Why?

ELIZABETH: You saw what he turns me into.¹²¹ I will not allow that.

BOOKER: And so what, you're going to kill him?

119. Additionally, the person responsible for building Comstock's Tear machine is also a woman: Rosalind Lutece, one of Comstock's two repentant agents. The other agent, Robert Lutece, is her male doppelganger from another universe.

120. Robert Yang sarcastically refers to these narrative button commands as "foundational moments in the Use Key Genre": "When *Infinite* wants to break from the meaninglessness, and suddenly assign all this narrative weight to a single button press—it is ridiculous. '[F] Experience Deep-Seated Emotional Trauma.'"

121. Without being rescued by Booker, Elizabeth will become the "seed of the prophet" who "drown[s] in flame the mountains of men." She will lead Columbia's armada in an aerial bombardment of New York City on the eve of 1984.

ELIZABETH: Is this where you start moralizing, Booker? You forget, I know you.

BOOKER: I'm not going to let you kill him.

[Elizabeth reopens the Tear to Kansas and the tornado]

ELIZABETH: Really, Booker? What are you going to do to stop me?

BOOKER: Not a damn thing. Because I'm gonna do it for you.

Booker is good at killing things, but ill-equipped to deal with trauma. His two solutions are to run from the problem or to take the moral responsibility of killing Comstock out of Elizabeth's hands. These responses stem from Booker's foundational trauma as a sixteen-year-old soldier in the Lakota massacre at Wounded Knee. In one set of universes, he escapes his guilt by becoming an alcoholic gambler. In another set of universes, he takes full moral responsibility for the massacre, rebranding himself as the patriotic defender of white Christianity. These two scenes of encountering sexualized vulnerability—the conversations after Elizabeth's menarche and rape—are Booker's last chances to act like a father. But the violence that birthed Booker and Comstock have stunted his capacity for affective attachment.

Against Politics: The Historical Antecedents of Fitzroy and Comstock

I am tempted to say that the true antagonist of *Infinite* is violence itself. American violence inspired Comstock, Comstock's violence inspired Fitzroy, and Fitzroy's violence inspired Elizabeth. Plante views *Infinite* as a clichéd anti-violence narrative, as “yet another violent videogame about how violent videogame players are.” Plante notes that the sheer body count of *Infinite*'s gameplay exceeds the most “exploitative” films and complains that the ludic violence “doesn't serve *BioShock Infinite*. It distracts from it.” Plante is mostly right. Videogames are the most violent artistic medium in existence. The specter of the violent videogame player has haunted political debates since the early 1990s, a scapegoat employed by both Democrats and Republicans to explain violent behavior among adolescents (Schott loc. 99). The violent gamer was recently resurrected by Donald Trump as the cause of school shootings, even though the causal relationship between violent videogames and violent behavior has largely been debunked (Schulzke 131-135). Videogame developers have responded to these political attacks by marrying violent gameplay with storylines about the corrosive effects of violence. If Levine intended *Infinite* to be a game against violence, Plante is right to criticize *Infinite*'s failure in this regard.

I believe *Infinite* is a game against politics, not violence. *Infinite*'s gameplay and narrative revolve around violence, but this violence primarily comes in the form of pleasurable ludic play: entertaining gun battles through the apolitical viewpoint of Booker DeWitt. Apolitical Booker does not care about the goals of Fitzroy and the Vox Populi, or Comstock and the Founders, Columbia's ruling class. He does not intend to offer them a political counterargument; he just intends to kill them and rescue Elizabeth. And while he is a tragic hero, he is still *Infinite*'s hero, the lens through which the player views Columbia's story. Booker fights alone against two armies; his success against them makes him an almost mythical, legendary warrior. His antagonists launch taunts from afar over a PA system and send others to do the fighting for them. Even if the player sympathizes with the politics of the Vox Populi or the Founders, the game makes it abundantly clear that their political leaders are ignoble villains.

Videogame developers like Levine have responded to political attacks against violent games not just by writing storylines about the corrosive effects of violence, but by blaming that violence on politics. Popular, exceedingly violent, narrative-centric franchises like *Far Cry*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Warcraft*, *Mass Effect*, and *The Elder Scrolls* place their protagonists in a bloody

conflict between two competing political factions. Shooting and hack-and-slash games require large populations of disposable enemies, and developers have increasingly drawn from contemporary and historical political conflicts to populate their game worlds. The anti-violence narratives attached to these violent games are not examples of ludonarrative dissonance¹²² or flawed game design. Rather, they are calculated juxtapositions between the harmless behavior of violent gaming and the destructive power of factional politics. Developers throw the blame back at politicians.

Fitzroy and Comstock inaccurately represent early twentieth-century history: Fitzroy's closest parallels are the black revolutionaries of the 1970s, and Comstock's closest parallels are the founders of Mormonism in the nineteenth century. But Fitzroy and Comstock serve *Infinite*'s familial narrative because the legacy of those groups evokes paternal anxiety about daughters: the polygamy and child marriage of early Mormonism, and the perceived brainwashing of daughters by black and leftist militants. The iconic image of 1970s leftist violence is an armed Patty Hearst robbing a bank for Donald DeFreeze. If the name of *BioShock*'s villain, Andrew Ryan, was a clue to his connection to Ayn Rand, perhaps Daisy Fitzroy's name is a clue to DeFreeze. They both escaped prison to become revolutionaries, and they both founded violent, multiracial terrorist groups. DeFreeze and Hearst's story have inspired white male authors in the past, from Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) to Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997). And Levine specifically cited Joseph Smith and Brigham Young as comparisons for Comstock (Suellentrop). Fitzroy and Comstock's physical and narratological similarities to these archetypes—the black revolutionary and the Mormon leader—help to paint their politics as corruptive to daughters and threatening to fathers, particularly to a father's role as a daughter's protector.

Fitzroy and Comstock's political ideologies antagonize the goals of Booker and Elizabeth, who each have their own gendered response: Booker kills the citizens of Columbia, whereas Elizabeth, in the game's narrative conclusion, sacrifices herself to erase Comstock and Columbia from history, thereby saving America from a future attack by Columbia's warships. Whether one views Elizabeth's sacrifice as a selfless act of heroism or a means to assuage Booker's guilt depends on the player's interpretation. Daisy Fitzroy's continued life as a black convict in the South is presumably worse for her than being a black revolutionary leader in Columbia, but at least America is safe from Columbia's warships. Elizabeth's sacrifice pits the future of the body politic against the needs of the family. Either their civilization can be saved, or Booker and Elizabeth can leave Columbia and become a family again, but each comes at the expense of the other. Levine has said that *Infinite* was not meant to contain a political message (Crossley). But by using far-left and far-right political movements as antagonists for its familial pair, *Infinite* paints far-left and far-right politics, for lack of a better term, as “anti-family.” Booker's familial love for Elizabeth is strangely both an apolitical ideal and, by process of elimination, most aligned with mainstream American liberalism. In short, by not making a political statement, *Infinite*'s narrative just reinforces the political status quo. Political ideologies which exist outside of American liberalism are threatening to one's daughter, and violence is justifiable (and pleasurable) when done in defense of one's daughter. Admittedly, the far-left and far-right groups Fitzroy and Comstock appear to be based upon were responsible for horrific acts of violence: the Mormon's Black Hawk War (1865-1872) and the 1857 Mountain Meadow massacre, or the Symbionese Liberation

122. Ludonarrative dissonance refers to when a game's ludic content, i.e. its gameplay, clashes with its narrative. Game designer Chris Hocking coined the term in a 2007 blog post on the original *BioShock* (Hocking). Hocking argued that *BioShock* offers the player a “ludic contract” (harm others and be rewarded) and a “narrative contract” (help others and be rewarded) which stand in opposition to each other.

Army's 1973 murder of school superintendent Marcus Foster. But a larger story of American political violence includes international wars, imperialist occupations, racial terrorism and the extermination of Amerindian tribes. *Infinite* does an admirable job of folding these events into its narrative, with references to the Boxer Rebellion, the Ku Klux Klan, and the massacre at Wounded Knee. But it fails to address how this violence was supported and carried out by American fathers, explicitly to protect their daughters and provide for their families. Political violence and familial love are not antithetical to one another. They often work in tandem.

Infinite's worldview reflects the demographics of the videogame industry: overwhelmingly white and male, somewhere in the vicinity of middle class and middle age. Booker is an ultra-violent, ultra-masculine representative of this demographic, and Elizabeth, at eighteen, is young enough to be both a daughter-figure and an object of inappropriate sexual desire. This is not to suggest that *Infinite*'s ideas can be reduced to a racialized and gendered response to parental anxiety, but simply that the homogeneity of the videogame industry causes blind spots to the perspectives of others. Scenes of racial and sexual violence that offend minority and female players are deployed as plot devices. Subjective assumptions, like the apolitical goodness of the American family or the dangers of political revolution, go unquestioned and unchallenged. If Levine meant *Infinite* to be a metanarrative about stagnant videogame design, then Comstock is the closest thing to a game developer: a clouded world creator who mistreats his subjects.

Regenerative Violence: *BioShock*'s Take on the Grand Videogame Narrative

There was once significant debate among academics as to whether videogames were literary texts. And while the debate has since died down, it is worth going back and thinking about why they asked the question. It was blamed on philosophical differences between ludologists, who wanted to think about videogames as competitive play, and narratologists, who wanted to think about videogames as interactive stories. But the most significant cause was generational. Older games with little-to-no storyline centered the gaming experience around problem-solving and pattern memorization: *Asteroids*, *Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders*. There is an entire generation of videogame focused almost exclusively on narrative-free ludic play. Over time, game developers incorporated other narrative mediums—films, cartoons, comics—to create stories for existing videogame IPs, encouraging players to develop affective relationships with game characters: *Super Mario Bros.*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Mega Man*. As graphical capabilities improved, “cut scenes” (essentially films/cartoons/comics within the game itself) became a means for developers to showcase their technology and build richer, more rewarding game narratives: *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Warcraft III*. Today extensive narratives, rounded characters and fleshed-out storyworlds are components of most AAA¹²³ videogames, and narratology plays a major role in digital game studies. One could point to the most critically acclaimed franchises of the last two decades as proof of narrative's value, but it is more telling that even game franchises with maligned narratives (*Resident Evil*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Call of Duty*) continue to make plot and character development a central part of the game experience. In other words, even game developers who are bad at telling stories keep trying to do so.

If the earlier debate over the videogame's literary status was the result of a specific period in videogame history (the transition from narrative-poor gaming to narrative-centric gaming), it is

123. “AAA” is a common term used to reference major game studios and their products. AAA connotes a highly graded product (like AAA baseball or AA eggs).

possible narrative will stop being a central part of the game experience, and the importance of narrative in digital game studies will drift away. With the rise of multiplayer gaming, peer-to-peer communication, and live streaming, much of the work that storytelling does for games (incentivizing gameplay, explaining game logic, and encouraging player affect) can be done by the players themselves, at less cost to the developers. Similarly, the rise of microtransactions (the selling of in-game currency and cosmetic items) has encouraged developers to focus less on linear, single-player campaigns, and more on evolving, expansive multiplayer competition. The exorbitant cost of developing AAA games, the difficulty of appealing to players across lines of language and culture, and the unique challenge of writing interactive stories around game mechanics suggest that game developers might be better served by focusing less on building rich, complex narratives.

This is all speculative—who knows what the game industry will look like twenty years from now—but *BioShock Infinite*'s release would be an appropriate beginning to an industry-wide shift away from narrative, particularly since the original *BioShock* (2007) was hailed by critics as evidence that videogames had become “serious” literary texts.¹²⁴ Despite its accolades and acclaim, *Infinite* belonged to an older, outdated game design. In a time when other first-person shooters included extensive multiplayer content, *Infinite* was exclusively single player. When other narrative-centric games incorporated sandbox maps, branching questlines and dialogue options, *Infinite* had a singular, linear story. When other games offered selectable, customizable avatars, *Infinite* had the unchangeable Booker DeWitt. It disguised this simplicity with interdimensional time travel and dream sequences, but *Infinite* was still a straightforward, unalterable storyline. In these ways, *Infinite* mimicked the structure of literary forms like novels and plays, eschewing contemporary trends in narrative popularized by franchises like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Mass Effect*, and *Fallout*. *Infinite* was essentially *Super Mario Bros.*—a man rescuing a princess from a castle—layered with a plethora of references to American imperialism, the Russian Revolution, black militancy, quantum theory, film noir, Christian fundamentalism, and the Electra complex. There has not been a AAA videogame before or since *Infinite* that so wanted itself to be taken seriously as literature. And yet at the same time, *Infinite* argues that no matter how many literary, historical, and scientific references get layered on top of a shooter, it is still just a game about shooting waves of enemies. The hidden joke in *Infinite*'s title is that gamers have been playing out this story for years—they have been rescuing princesses, killing waves of enemies, looting corpses, and clearing dungeons—so no matter what complex geopolitical narrative a writer like Levine lays over it, a game's ludic elements form a larger story that spans across an infinite number of games. Oftentimes this narrative concerns defeating everyone to secure a woman, or saving your species from an external threat, or establishing yourself as a leader. And at a baser level, video games represent a long narrative about a person staring at a screen, pressing buttons on a controller, trying

124. In the decade of *BioShock*'s release, a handful of prominent tastemakers still denied videogame's artistic status, most famously film critics Roger Ebert (“Video Games Can Never Be Art” 2010) and Jack Kroll (“‘Emotion Engine?’ I Don’t Think So” 2000). Novelist John Lanchester, in an essay otherwise dismissive of the entire medium's potential (“Is It Art?” 2009), admitted that *BioShock* was “visually striking, verging on intermittently beautiful, also violent, dark, sleep-troubling, and perhaps, to some of its intended audience, thought-provoking.” *BioShock* remains the highest-rated PC game of all time, according to *Metacritic*. Scholar Felan Parker identifies *BioShock* as a *prestige game*, a class of games which “serve an analogous exemplifying function to prestige pictures, bringing legitimacy to the whole industry and culture of digital games through their (comparatively) high cultural status” (2). Parker continues: “Prestige games have been the primary site for mainstream gaming culture's attempts to constitute digital games as a legitimate art form. *Bioshock* in particular has served as a catalyst for critical discourse and a common reference point in much broader discussions about the cultural value of games” (2-3).

to fulfill a goal. Basically, *Infinite* is a postmodern videogame tolling the death of the grand videogame narrative, and its complex geopolitical narrative is meant to illuminate, through contrast, the baser narratives at play throughout the history of gaming.

Production Demands as an Alternate Theory on *Infinite*'s Racial Violence

To better understand *Infinite*'s pessimistic metanarrative, think of it as Levine's third iteration of one concept, the first two iterations being *System Shock 2* and *BioShock*, all of which share similar plot structure and game mechanics. They are all first-person shooters; they all feature an amnesiac male protagonist; they all take place in futuristic and retro-futuristic dystopias. They all tell the history of the dystopia through a series of found audio diaries, coupled with ghostly apparitions who play out their past lives. They all feature two primary antagonists: an authoritarian, masculine figure who controls the dystopia, and a marginalized, emasculated or female figure who wrests control from the former by weaponizing the dystopia's citizenry. This second antagonist is the protagonist's helpful guide, only to be revealed as a villain in the game's later stages. Players gain access to firearms and magical abilities as they progress, but their first weapon is always a wrench. Players scavenge corpses and objects to find resources, ammunition, and currency, the latter of which can be spent at vending machines to upgrade your weapons and abilities. Players also craft, repair, and hack machinery in order to access new areas or take control of security systems, although these skills are drastically pared down in *Infinite*. Levine has relied on these ludonarrative elements since work began on *System Shock 2* in the late 1990s.

This repetition of narrative and ludic devices is commonplace in the game industry, for the same reason as in the film industry: repetitive sequels are a much safer and more lucrative investment, and running a studio is an inherently risky enterprise. But since *Infinite* was not actually a sequel, much of the game's ludonarrative flaws stem from ideas originally created for *System Shock 2* (hence referred to as *System*) that subsequently felt out of place. *System* takes place on a massive spaceship in the twenty-second century. An amnesiac soldier awakens from cryosleep to find that the ship's crew has been turned into zombies that share a consciousness called the Many. The ship's operating system, the HAL-like XERXES, considers the soldier to be a threat. A survivor, a female scientist, guides the soldier to safety, where she reveals herself to be SHODAN, a malevolent AI and the mother of the Many. These plot elements, as fantastical as they may be, allow the narrative and ludic devices plausibility: finding audio diaries scattered throughout the ship makes sense, since scientists and travelers often record their observations on tape. Scavenging materials from containers makes sense, since laboratories and ships often store extra supplies. Purchasing software and ammunition from vending machines makes sense, since those are items scientists and soldiers would need (think of the machines like a "company store" for intergalactic sharecroppers). Within the logic of *System*'s gameworld, these elements fit.

System's spiritual sequel, *BioShock*, also maintains ludonarrative plausibility. *BioShock* takes place in an underwater city in the year 1960. Andrew Ryan, an amalgamation of Ayn Rand and John D. Rockefeller, has created a libertarian utopia where dreamers and artists have flourished without the constraints of government. His nemesis, Frank Fontaine, has used this regulatory freedom to sell "plasmids" to the masses—gene elixirs which grant magical abilities but slowly turn users into insane addicts called "splicers." Ryan responds to this epidemic of "splicers" by instituting martial law, and Fontaine responds in turn by rallying the crazed masses against him. When the amnesiac protagonist enters Rapture, he is guided through voice comms by a poor Irish immigrant trying to rescue his family. Near the end of the game, the immigrant reveals himself to

be Fontaine (and Ryan is revealed to be the protagonist's father). Again, it is plausible that egocentric, brain-addled artists and entrepreneurs recorded their thoughts on tape. It is plausible that panicked, spiraling citizens stashed supplies in the wreckage and detritus of the city. And it is plausible that predatory capitalists like Frank Fontaine set up vending machines to sell weapons to lunatics. Fontaine takes over the role of deceiver from SHODAN, and Ryan takes over the role of ruler from XERSES, and a game about objectivism repurposes the ideas of a game about artificial intelligence.

But in *Infinite*, these borrowed ideas begin to break down. Levine uses what I refer to as “two-souled sufferers” to represent how characters and concepts appear broken or ugly when overused. In *Infinite*, when Booker and Elizabeth use a Tear to travel to another universe, they abuse the fabric of spacetime. This results in traces of the last universe coming through the Tear as well, so that the souls of dead characters in the last universe now inhabit the bodies of their living counterparts in the next universe. Having two souls, one alive and one dead, fractures the characters' psyches, destroys their ability to function, and leaves them with a staticky, flickering appearance. These two-souled sufferers are based on an earlier, discarded design concept known as “the Merged” (likely a nod to *System*'s “the Many”). The Merged were citizens of Columbia whose overuse of Tears left them with bits of their other selves (from other universes) hideously grafted onto their bodies: characters with two-and-a-half faces, or characters with their infant skull growing out of their adult skull (Murdoch). The Merged and the two-souled sufferers serve as a metacommentary on *Infinite*'s borrowed design and suggest Levine's self-awareness of *Infinite*'s underlying problems. Levine claims that “we probably cut two games worth of stuff out of the game,” meaning that the lack of player choices, the reliance on borrowed content and the metacommentary about game design may have evolved over time as a response to *Infinite*'s difficult production schedule (Farrelly). Early demos of *Infinite* show a wealth of locations, characters and other content that never made it into the final version.¹²⁵ Perhaps *Infinite*'s depictions of racial and sexual violence may have appeared less problematic in the context of a richer, more complete narrative that was simplified out of necessity. These decisions over what to cut and what to keep belie the priorities of white male game developers, even developers as progressive as Levine. *Infinite*'s metatextual elements were prioritized. The narrative of a violent father and his sexualized daughter were prioritized. The narratives of Fitzroy and Comstock, and the larger question of why politically marginalized groups resort to violence, were never prioritized.

Many of the narrative and ludic elements that made logical sense in *System* and *BioShock* are now implausible in *Infinite*. Citizens of an authoritarian government would not record their secret thoughts on Voxophones (portable voice recorders) and carelessly leave them lying around. Columbia's government would never allow the public to have Voxophones in the first place. Maintaining power in an authoritarian state requires the control of information and communication. An authoritarian state would never provide vending machines that sell weapons and ammunition because that would allow subversives to anonymously arm themselves. The notion that players would find currency in trash cans or carnival food in desk drawers is also implausible. These flawed game mechanics are all borrowed designs from *System* and *BioShock*. And borrowed designs caused the two major criticisms that *Infinite* has faced: that the game is too violent, and that Daisy Fitzroy's evil turn makes *Infinite*, as one writer put it, “a game in which

124. The original 2010 demo can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXtEAD3zgo>. The 2011 Electronic Entertainment Expo demo can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=attvYJb6xn8>.

Donald Trump founded a xenophobic colony in the sky, only to learn that the Mexicans really are rapists” (Suellentrop). The first-person shooter combat system and Fitzroy’s role as deceiver—a marginalized victim who rallies the violent masses—were carried over from Levine’s earlier games. One can only speculate as to why Levine chose to reproduce these ludic and narrative elements from *System* and *BioShock*, but I suspect part of it boils down to the financial realities of AAA game development: sequels are more appealing to consumers and investors. Carrying over ludic and narrative elements from earlier games justifies calling the game a sequel and reduces the time and cost of development. And part of it boils down to the positionalities of Levine and his fellow creators.

After *Infinite*, Levine left his studio to form a new, smaller studio, Ghost Story Games. They focus on a design concept dubbed “narrative LEGOs”: breaking down a narrative into its smallest components, then dumping that bucket of narrative components onto a sandbox game and letting players build their own stories based on their own choices. This move represents both a reaction to the struggles and flaws of *Infinite*, and a desire to make narrative-centric games as cost-effective and replayable as narrative-poor multiplayer games. Five years have passed without Ghost Story announcing a single title, suggesting that Levine’s new narrative model is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Infinite’s utilization of race, gender, and violence deserves critiquing. But larger discussions of race and violence should include consideration of how the current state of AAA game development hinders the growth of new ideas, and how important narrative will continue to be as an element of game design. It seems that new ideas will come about not by the promotion of progressive and/or minority developers at major studios, or by supporting indie games that tackle challenging themes in thoughtful ways (although both these strategies are helpful), but rather by building new gaming communities.

A model for this is GDQ (Games Done Quick), a charitable organization built around speed-running (completing a game as quickly as possible).¹²⁶ The primary recipient is the Prevent Cancer Foundation, but GDQ supports other causes as well. Speed-running breaks the overlaid narrative in a videogame: players skip large plot chunks and rapidly tap through dialogue, and the commentary at a GDQ event drowns out a game’s music and voice acting. But fighting cancer becomes a narrative replacement. The better a player performs—not just how quickly they complete the game, but how well they explain tricks and how much levity they add to the experience—the more donations they get. In-game decisions, such as what to name a character, are voted on through donations. Viewers who donate include messages about family members they lost to cancer, which a host reads aloud, and some players discuss their own experiences with illness and how the speed-running community supported them. There is always a couch in the background where other speed-runners sit and offer additional commentary, adding to the sense of community. In this sense gaming returns to its roots in communal play around shared goals and values, and the narratives created by a small set of privileged developers become replaced with a narrative chosen democratically by a larger community.

126. GDQ has raised nearly \$20 million for charity, including \$2.4 million at its most recent 2019 event. They hold two main events each year—one in January, another during summer—as well as one-off events for emergencies. GDQ serves as the largest fundraising event for both the Prevent Cancer Foundation and Doctors Without Borders. More information on their work can be found at <https://gamesdonequick.com/>.

Conclusion: The Cost of Playing Games

In your first playthrough, *BioShock Infinite* can be just a game about a private detective shooting his way through a difficult case. The player only finds out about Booker and Elizabeth's kinship in the final twenty minutes, so the scenes detailed above hold a different and more innocuous meaning. The metaphorical menarche and symbolic rape are simply moments for the straight male player to gaze at Elizabeth's cleavage. The thematic conflict between family and politics disguises itself as a budding romance between a world-weary older man and a virginal teenager. This first playthrough feels surprisingly more rewarding than the one experienced during subsequent playthroughs, largely because the "Ambitions of Meaning" that Robert Yang identified are less clear. The first Booker and Elizabeth are recognizable archetypes drawn from pulp fiction, and the player navigates through Columbia like a detective solving a case. By identifying these generic tropes, we presume that Booker is a simplified hero-figure. The final scene's revelation that Booker and Comstock are the same person ruins the value of subsequent replays. To borrow from a popular time-travel trope: having gone back in time to kill Hitler, players do not want to spend another fifteen hours helping alternate-Hitler reconnect with his daughter again. Seeing black women victimized and a teenage girl violated so alternate-Hitler can experience catharsis is not a pleasurable experience for most players. One interpretive possibility, albeit a generous one, is that Ken Levine intentionally ruined subsequent playthroughs so that players would stop finding enjoyment in the simulation of historical trauma. The more likely answer is that Levine was blind to these problematic elements. Or perhaps his target audience was the sort of people who can spend \$50 on a AAA videogame, finish it in a week, and spend \$50 on another one. In other words, Levine designed his narrative for people who do not view replayability as a practical, financial necessity, people with the same class positionality as himself. The evaluation of art should incorporate the cost required to view it, and in this way *BioShock Infinite* speaks to and for a specific demographic of Americans. The degree to which *Infinite*'s initial reviewers praised the game reflects how videogame journalists, videogame developers and a large cohort of videogame players seek out and reward texts which look and think like themselves.

CONCLUSION: THE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF VIOLENCE

When I began this project, I hoped to use violent literature to work through philosophical questions of whether ethical violence exists and how ethical violence could be justified. In other words, I wanted to think about using real violence as a tool for social justice. Instead, I found writers interested in using literary violence as a tool by itself. Each of my authors employed literary violence as a rhetorical weapon to enhance their criticisms of nationalized cultural, religious, and political institutions. Wright lashed out against the expectations placed upon black novelists by the American reading public, as well as the Communist and capitalist institutions that sought to coopt his work. By crafting a critical and commercial failure in the American literary marketplace, Wright widened the rift between himself and his homeland. He forced himself to encounter new postcolonial communities and devoted the next chapter of his life to documenting their worlds. James lashed out against the romanticized violence of European and African folklore, as well as the mythologies of British chivalry and Maroon heroism baked into Jamaican history. James describes himself as “post-post-colonial,” a writer who deconstructs both colonial and postcolonial masculinities (Tolentino). Like *The Outsider*, *The Book of Night Women* was James’s first expatriate novel, and it allowed him to attack two heteronormative traditions that dictated life as a queer boy in 1980s Jamaica. McCarthy lashed out against the meaning-making and world-ordering of Catholicism and liberal arts departments, as well as the American exceptionalism proffered by nineteenth-century writers. *Blood Meridian* was McCarthy’s first novel after leaving Appalachia for the American Southwest, and he populated this new, old space with Tennessee characters and conflicts, particularly the racial terrorism of the 1950s and 1960s. An altar boy in his youth, a failed college student in his twenties, McCarthy came to reject Catholicism and academia as weak accomplices in the violence of American progress. Levine lashed out against the demonization of videogames by American politicians, as well as the constraints and demands placed upon videogame developers by publishers and players. *Infinite* was Levine’s first game to require multiple studios in multiple countries, and the stress of the project caused him to leave the AAA-game industry entirely. He centered his final AAA narrative on familial reconciliation and cast politicians and industrialists as the family’s primary foes. These writers’ obscene violence offends many readers, and the offense is intentional. The offense carves out a textual space for subversive and transgressive ideas to flourish, an intimate space for likeminded and sympathetic readers to nestle within. My project offers a resolution to longstanding scholarly debates over these texts’ cultural significance by asserting that their textual flaws are essential to producing their textual value. Primarily, this assertion means that obscene violence can only attract one set of readers by repelling another set of readers. More broadly, this assertion means that politically subversive novels must fail with one set of readers in order to succeed with another. As scholars at institutions which help to assign texts their value, we should recognize this dynamic and incorporate it into our studies. We need to understand why we like and dislike certain texts, and why others often disagree with us.

Many literary critics argue that the increased frequency and intensity of literary violence reflects our anxieties over the increased frequency and intensity of violence in American society. This argument ignores evidence that American violence has steadily declined over the last forty years.¹²⁷ From 1991 to 2016, homicides decreased 46%, rapes decreased 30%, robberies decreased

127. For more far-reaching claims of a historical and worldwide decline in violence, see Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), John Mueller’s *The Remnants of War* (2004), Joshua

62% and assaults decreased 43% (Asher). Even in Rust Belt cities where violence spiked over the last five years as a delayed effect of the Great Recession, the murder rate still sits well below its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, the increase in literary violence corresponds to our increased access to violent images through visual mediums, images once only available to those who lived and worked in spaces of violence: the prison, the battlefield, the emergency room, the factory killing floor, etc. As the recent terrorist attacks in Christchurch made clear, individuals can now livestream events on social media, allowing viewers to watch an episode of violence play out in real time unadulterated and unfiltered.¹²⁸ We can all gorge ourselves on violence if we wish.

But we are reaching an inflection point in which the prestige of literary violence begins to decline. In the media marketplace, American consumers can now access the obscenest depictions of violence instantly and without cost. We can now watch a real eyeball be ripped out of a real head. I have no desire to see that, but I imagine watching such an event would lessen the pleasure of reading ocular trauma in Poe, McCarthy, James, and others. Because obscene literary violence, like obscene speech, requires a larger culture of censorship in order to have a rhetorical effect. The more unfettered access we have to images of violence, the less powerful those images become. This change does not amount to desensitization, but rather to familiarization. We gain a more complex understanding of violence as a subject, and it becomes harder for writers to wield a violent image as a rhetorical cudgel.

For now, the invocation of real-world violence in a textual space holds a remarkable rhetorical power, even within the space of scholarship. Two recent scholars of twentieth and twenty-first century American literary violence open their books with personal testimonies about violence. The preface of James Giles's *The Spaces of Violence* (2006) includes two memories. As a teenager in the 1950s, in a quiet Texas town, Giles witnesses a man being shot and killed across the street. Then Giles, as a graduate student, shelters in the student center during the University of Texas tower shooting in 1966. The introduction of Greg Forter's *Murdering Masculinities* (2000) describes his experience, as an eleven-year-old boy in the early 1970s, watching his mother die from cancer in the living room of their home. Both scholars cite these events as cause and justification for their subsequent interests in literary violence. These personal narratives demand our attention and sympathy, not just to the narratives themselves, but to the scholarship which follows. But contemporary youth have instant, endless access to such violence from the smartphones in their pockets. How they will respond and reproduce these violent images through new fiction and scholarship would be a worthy subject for continued investigation. I suspect the spectacle of literary violence will lose its rhetorical power and writers will find other means to persuade their readers. Or perhaps a new era of censorship will emerge in response to these images, and literary violence will remain as powerful as before.

For this project, I focused on violence on the page as well as videogame violence. I think both forms are better suited to persuade readers than film. Novels force readers to imagine what their violence looks like. Videogames force players to act out their violence. Both mediums implicate consumers in the violent image's production. Because we share a degree of responsibility in the image's production, the violence becomes more intimate. Novels and videogames strengthen

S. Goldstein's *Winning the War on War* (2011) and Manuel Eisner's "Long-Term Historical Trends in Violent Crime" (2003).

128. Facebook removed 1.5 million uploads of the recorded video, 1.2 million of which were deleted automatically (Timberg et al.). The media giant faced widespread criticism for allowing such content on their platforms.

this intimacy by giving us control over our experience. We can skim over a violent passage, or we can go back and closely reread it, pausing to think about what it means. We can try to sneak past our videogame foes, or we can brutally murder them, but we must press the button ourselves. With film, we passively watch the image play out. Other than shutting our eyes, we do not control what we see or when we see it. We may find the violence disgusting or hilarious, but we are less likely to feel complicit. Novels require hundreds of pages of reading, and videogames require dozens of hours of playing. Novel and videogame writers imbue a character's violence with meaning by first building their life over hours of content. A feature-length film only requires two hours of our time. Hollywood can accomplish meaningful violence through franchises, building up to a character's death over the course of multiple films. But franchise characters never really die, they just go on hiatus. And Hollywood can accomplish meaningful violence by repeating the same basic plots over and over, converting the underlying logic of their violence into truth, but such violence can never truly be subversive or revolutionary. Violent films are spectacles, virtuosic performances of stage combat and special effects that show people being harmed in ways that protect real people from harm. Rather than make filmic violence feel more real, the presence of actors reminds us that their violence is staged. I do not mean to suggest that filmic violence holds no value, but only to explain why I did not study filmic violence for my project.

If this project were to include a chapter on filmic violence, it would look to television dramas, whose narrative length resembles that of novels and videogames. As a brief example: viewers love *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), the HBO series based on George R. R. Martin's incomplete, seven-volume fantasy epic *A Song of Ice and Fire*, for its violent content. The show uses sudden moments of obscene violence to punctuate larger arguments about the myths we use to justify war: the sanitization of the battlefield, the valorization of soldiers, the moral superiority assigned to victors, etc. The show's most memorable, most talked about scenes are always character deaths and battles. A compilation of fan reactions to "The Red Wedding," a scene in which multiple heroes are betrayed and murdered, has over fourteen million views on YouTube ("Game of Thrones"). Fans love the shocking violence of *Thrones*' so much that we enjoy watching other people being shocked by it. And many scenes include the sort of ocular trauma mentioned in my introduction.¹²⁹ The show is incredibly popular: over 32 million viewers watched each episode of the show's seventh season (Bauder). But *Thrones*' plot has gone far beyond where George R. R. Martin's unfinished book series left off, and new characters feel like caricatures, and their violence feels empty and exploitative. The show remains committed to the same degree of obscene violence as the books, but without any backstory or character development, the violence lost its meaning.

The failure of *Thrones* stems in part from its shift away from intimate violence—personal betrayals and psychological horror—towards the impersonal, spectacular violence of the battlefield. In earlier seasons, perhaps because of budgetary constraints, *Thrones* rarely depicted battles. In later seasons, coinciding with the show's departure from its source material, battles became its most defining feature: the last four seasons had nearly a dozen, while the first four seasons only had two. Instead of focusing on interpersonal relationships, *Thrones* became focused

129. Jory Cassel, Ned Stark's second-in-command, receives a sword in his eye during a street fight. A rather large character, the Mountain, uses his thumbs to push in the eyes and crush the skull of the Red Viper. The reanimated corpse of the Mountain later employs this same technique on his brother, the Hound, which the Hound circumvents by stabbing the Mountain in the eye. A master assassin, Arya Stark, stabs a sadistic pedophile in his eye. Wun Wun, a literal giant, dies from an arrow to his eye. His reanimated corpse later dies from a dagger to his eye.

on battle tactics and strategy. The recent mistakes of *Thrones* represent part of a larger problem with our understanding of literary violence: we privilege violent literature designed for male consumers. We know that women read more than men. We know women—by a wide margin—read true crime more than men.¹³⁰ And yet we focus on literary violence that caters to the male gaze: visual media like Hollywood blockbusters and AAA videogames, and stories about war and gang violence. The rise of massively popular, female-hosted true crime podcasts like *My Favorite Murder* and *Serial*; and massively popular, female-led television thrillers like *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-present); *The Fall* (2013-2016); *You* (2019-present); *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999-present); and *Snapped* (2004-present) show that literary violence is often designed by and for women, with all the same grotesquerie, obscenity and perversity as content designed for men.

As the show airs its eighth and final season, *Thrones* fans have come to hate one character above all others: Euron Greyjoy. Euron rules the Iron Islands, a rocky archipelago whose people survive on raiding and piracy. They are essentially the Vikings of Westeros. Euron has aligned himself with Cersei Lannister, the queen of Westeros and the show's primary villainess. With his fleet of the fastest ships ever built, Euron appears out of nowhere to sink armadas and kidnap his foes. The show has employed this ability three times over its final twelve episodes, the most recent of which involved Euron using ship-mounted ballistae to take down a dragon. These contrivances have led fans to complain that Euron only functions as a *deus ex machina*, "A power, event, person, or thing that comes in the nick of time to solve a difficulty; providential interposition, esp. in a novel or play" ("deus ex machina, *n.*"). A Reddit post on r/gameofthrones titled "Euron Greyjoy is the worst written character of this series by a mile" has 32,000 upvotes and 5,200 comments. *Buzzfeed's* Jenna Guillaume calls Euron "a completely one-dimensional character who prances around making crude jokes, and whose sole motivation seems to be wanting to fuck the queen." *The Ringer's* Kiley McAtee labels him "the deus ex pirate" and "evil Jack Sparrow," arguing that "No character is a better embodiment of *Thrones'* late-season pacing and plot failings than Euron." *Pajiba's* Petr Knava penned a blog post titled, "I Hate Stupid Euron Greyjoy and His Stupid Plot-Convenient Face on 'Game of Thrones.'" In short, fans hate Euron because his motivations are too weak, and his powers are too strong.

And fans and critics are right: Euron is a *deus ex machina*. But the book version of Euron is a very different beast. Book Euron is Lovecraftian horror.¹³¹ This statement requires a bit of explanation. Book Euron has traveled to the ruins of Valyria, which is essentially Westeros's

128. See Vicary and Fraley. In their study of Amazon book reviews, they found women wrote 70% of true crime reviews, compared to 52% of all book reviews. When given the choice between a book in the true crime genre or the war genre, 77% of women chose true crime (compared to 51% of men). They also found gendered differences in expected enjoyment: women who picked a true crime book expected to enjoy it more than men who picked a true crime book, and men who picked a war book expected to enjoy it more than women who picked a war book. Vicary and Fraley conducted the same study with a true crime book and book about gang violence, and found the same gendered discrepancies.

131. Lovecraftian refers to H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), an influential American horror writer who developed the Cthulhu Mythos, a pantheon of cosmic, uncaring deities. David McWilliam describes Lovecraftian horror as "a nihilistic view of the universe that, if accepted, threatens to unravel human epistemology as currently understood" (531). Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock characterize Lovecraftian horror as "an antihumanist orientation that challenges universal human supremacy and rethinks the relation of the human to the nonhuman" (4). Lovecraft's most famous creation, Cthulhu, has a tentacled head and wings like a dragon.

version of Chernobyl.¹³² Valyria was once a massive slave city built on gold mining. The slaves were forced to dig hundreds of miles under the mountains of Valyria in tunnels so hot they burned the skin. The Faceless Men, the master assassins of Westeros, originated in Valyria to grant the wishes of slaves who begged for death. And in those mountains, the Valyrians discovered dragons, and with those dragons, the Valyrians ruled the world. Dragons are essentially the nuclear weapons of Westeros. As a force more powerful than any conventional weapon, dragons changed the nature of war. Four hundred years before the events of *Thrones*, Valyria experienced a cataclysmic event known as the Doom, a chain of volcanic eruptions that laid waste to the city and surrounding area. And today the seas surrounding Valyria still boil, and only two people have ever traveled there.

Martin does not describe the Doom. Succinctly describing the Doom would be like describing the destruction of Hiroshima from the perspective of a pilot flying overhead: it fails to capture the horror of the experience. Instead, Martin relies on the same sort of intimate, obscene violence as the true crime genre: he describes the Doom's lingering effects on subsequent visitors. The first was the child princess Aerea Targaryen, roughly 250 years before the events of *Thrones*. She died shortly after returning. In *Fire & Blood* (2018), Martin's history of the Targaryen dynasty, the *septon* (priest) who cared for Aerea writes an extensive description of her suffering, some of which is included below:

How could the gods be so blind or so uncaring as to permit such horror? Or is it possible that there are other deities in this universe, monstrous evil gods such as the priests of Red R'hllor preach against, against whose malice the kings of men and the gods of men are naught but flies?

I do not know. I do not want to know. If this makes me a faithless septon, so be it [...] but we could observe certain...swellings inside her, as her skin bulged out and then sunk down again, as if...no, not as if, for this was the truth of it...there were *things* inside her, living things, moving and twisting, mayhaps searching for a way out [...] The things...Mother have mercy, I do not know how to speak of them...they were...worms with faces...snakes with hands...twisting, slimy, unspeakable things that seemed to writhe and pulse and squirm as they came bursting from her flesh. Some were no bigger than my little finger, but one at least was as long as my arm...oh, Warrior protect me, the sounds they made... (loc. 3700-3750)

The horror lies in the violation of a young girl's body, the witness's inability to fully describe it and the crisis of faith it produced in a holy man. And the use of slimy, tentacled imagery to describe an evil so powerful that all men and gods are like flies beneath it sounds distinctly like something from H. P. Lovecraft.¹³³ The ridiculousness of *Thrones*'s Euron—that he can appear out of nowhere to take down a dragon—serves as the show's poor stand-in for unspeakable, otherworldly horror. *Thrones* attempts this horror in the masculine space of the battlefield, whereas Martin accomplishes this horror in the intimate space of a septon's chambers, in the body of a young female victim. Martin's fragmented textual description forces the reader to imagine the creatures

132. Technically, Westeros is only one of three continents in *Thrones*, but since the world itself does not have a name, I use Westeros hereafter to reference the entire world. And while we are given multiple pieces of evidence that Euron has really been to Valyria, he may ultimately be lying. The books are unfinished, so nothing is for certain.

133. A collection of Lovecraft references in Martin's work can be found on *A Forum of Ice and Fire*, written by the user ChillyPolly: <https://asoiaf.westeros.org/index.php?/topic/124235-lovecraft-references/>.

inside Aerea's body, making us participants in the violation. *Thrones* shows us the image of a dying dragon, in public, in daylight, and the image has no effect (other than infuriating readers).

Martin's description of Valyria's second visitor, Euron, utilizes the same obscene violence as the serial killers of true crime books.¹³⁴ In a sample chapter of Martin's forthcoming *Winds of Winter*, Euron kidnaps his younger brother Aeron Greyjoy, the high priest of the Iron Islands and worshipper of the Drowned God. In conversation, we learn that Euron repeatedly raped Aeron and his brother Uriggon as children, and that Euron murdered three of their brothers. We see that Euron has kidnapped and tortured other priests of other faiths. Three warlocks have been forced to eat the body of their leader, who still lives chained with no legs. Three septons have had their tongues cut out. A red priest of the fire god R'hllor has his hands "burned down to the bone, and his face was a charred and blackened horror where two blind eyes moved sightlessly above the cracked cheeks dripping pus" (Martin). Euron keeps these men because he believes their blood holds power, and because he does not fear godly retribution. He ties these men to the prows of his ships to signify his invulnerability to godly intervention. He does the same to the woman carrying his bastard child, after cutting out her tongue as well. As a *deus ex machina* in a world that already has a multiplicity of gods, Euron serves a power above the known gods, a cosmic force unknown to Westeros except through the Doom of Valyria. I read this god as atomic technology, a world-destroyer, a representation of man's capacity for total annihilation. Martin uses the perverse violence of a serial killer to convey that sort of horror.

In Aeron's dreams, Martin employs the same Lovecraftian imagery as Aerea's torment. Euron forces Aeron, a born-again alcoholic, to drink shade of the evening, a hallucinogenic liquor stolen from warlocks. In his nightmares, Aeron sees his brother on the Iron Throne, the massive seat of the king of Westeros fashioned from the swords of fallen enemies. On these swords, the corpses of every god are left as tributes:

Impaled upon the longer spikes were the bodies of the gods. The Maiden was there and the Father and the Mother, the Warrior and Crone and Smith ... even the Stranger. They hung side by side with all manner of queer foreign gods: the Great Shepherd and the Black Goat, three-headed Trios and the Pale Child Bakkalon, the Lord of Light and the butterfly god of Naath.

And there, swollen and green, half-devoured by crabs, the Drowned God festered with the rest, seawater still dripping from his hair. (Martin)

In short, Euron's ascendancy of the Iron Throne entails not only the death of other lords, but also the death of other gods and the gifts they provide men: hope, providence and faith. In his next nightmare, Aeron "saw his brother on the Iron Throne again, but Euron was no longer human. He seemed more squid than man, a monster fathered by a kraken of the deep, his face a mass of writhing tentacles" (Martin). Here Euron is no longer Euron, but rather a vessel, like Aerea Targaryen, for some sort of tentacled Lovecraftian evil from Valyria. He is Cthulhu, Lovecraft's famous octopus-head monster. Much like Martin offers the Night King and the Long Night as a metaphor for climate change, Euron Greyjoy and the Doom are a metaphor for nuclear holocaust.

The twist, which viewers have only just learned, is that the nuclear holocaust happens, but it comes at the hands of Daenerys Targaryen, a young woman who spent seven seasons freeing slaves and fighting injustice. The show's dragon-riding heroine, the woman who began her narrative as the sexual property of a military general in the Mongol-like Dothraki horde, burns

134. Martin read this chapter, entitled "The Forsaken," at Balticon 2016, a Baltimore science fiction and fantasy convention. Summaries have since appeared online, and a transcript can be read at <https://thehawke.github.io/twow-excerpts/chapters/forsaken.html>.

down the city of King's Landing. She kills a million residents in the process. Fans are furious: a petition asking HBO to remake the final season "with competent writers" has 1.5 million signatures (Dylan D.). I assume Martin, over the course of his final two books, will shape Daenerys into a supremely dark antiheroine, a woman who evolves from sexualized victim to vengeance incarnate. On the page, this might appeal to female and male readers alike, but the show has become a masculine spectacle of battles and bloodshed with no interiority. *Thrones* is now *Blood Meridian* without the poetry, perversity and required participation. Its final season cost over fifteen million dollars per episode, looks incredibly gorgeous and has relatively nothing to say (Ryan and Littleton). Novels, with their low cost of production and wealth of content, are still the best medium to show obscene violence as a form of rhetorical argument.

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